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THE FATAL THREE

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "VIXEN,"
"ISHMAEL," "MOHAWKS,"
ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. III.

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ATROPOS; OR THAT WHICH MUST BE.

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BOOK THE THIRD.

ATROPOS; OR THAT WHICH MUST BE.

CHAPTER I.

A WRECKED LIFE.

Monsieur Leroy was interested in his visitor, and in nowise hastened her departure. He led her through the garden of the asylum, anxious that she should see that sad life of the shattered mind in its milder aspect. The quieter patients were allowed to amuse themselves at liberty in the garden, and here Mildred saw the woman who fancied herself the Blessed Virgin, and who sat apart from the rest, with a crown of withered anemones upon her iron-gray locks.

The doctor stopped to talk to her in the Niçois language, describing her hallucination to Mildred in his broken English between whiles.

"She is one of my oldest cases, and mild as a lamb," he said. "She is what superstition had made her. She might have been a happy wife as a mother but for that fatal influence. Ah, here comes

a lady of a very different temper, and not half so easy a subject!"

A woman of about sixty advanced towards them along the dusty gravel path between the trampled grass and the dust-whitened orange-trees, a woman who carried her head and shoulders with the pride of an empress, and who looked about her with defiant eyes, fanning herself with a large Japanese paper fan as she came along, a fan of vivid scarlet and cheap gilt paper, which seemed to intensify the brightness of her great black eyes, as she waved it to and fro before her haggard face: a woman who must once have been beautiful.

"Would you believe that lady was prima donna at La Scala nearly forty years ago?" asked the doctor, as he and Mildred stood beside the path, watching that strange figure, with its theatrical dignity.

The massive plaits of grizzled black hair were wound, coronet-wise, about the woman's head. Her rusty black velvet gown trailed in the dust, thread-bare long ago, almost in tatters to-day: a gown of a strange fashion, which had been worn upon the

stage—Leonora's or Lucrezia's gown, perhaps, once upon a time.

At sight of the physician she stopped suddenly, and made him a sweeping curtsy, with all the exaggerated grace of the theatre.

"Do you know if they open this month at the Scala?" she asked, in Italian.

"Indeed, my dear, I have heard nothing of their doings."

"They might have begun their season with the new year," she said, with a dictatorial air. "They always did in my time. Of course you know that they have tried to engage me again. They wanted me for Amina, but I had to remind them that I am not a light soprano. When I reappear it shall be as Lucrezia Borgia. There I stand on my own ground. No one can touch me there."

She sang the opening bars of Lucrezia's first scena. The once glorious voice was rough and discordant, but there was power in the tones even yet, and real dramatic fire in the midst of exaggeration. Suddenly while she was singing she caught the expression of Mildred's face watching her, and she

stopped at a breath, and grasped the stranger by both hands with an excited air.

"That moves you, does it not?" she exclaimed. "You have a soul for music. I can see that in your face. I should like to know more of you. Come and see me whenever you like, and I will sing to you. The doctor lets me use his piano sometimes, when he is in a good humour."

"Say rather when you are reasonable, my good Maria," said Monsieur Leroy, laying a fatherly hand upon her shoulder; "there are days when you are not to be trusted."

"I am to be trusted to-day. Let me come to your room and sing to her," pointing to Mildred with her fan. "I like her face. She has the eyes and lips that console. Her husband is lucky to have such a wife. Let me sing to her. I want her to understand what kind of woman I am."

"Would it bore you too much to indulge her, madame?" asked the doctor in an undertone. "She is a strange creature, and it will wound her if you refuse. She does not often take a fancy to any

one; but she frequently takes dislikes, and those are violent."

"I shall be very happy to hear her," answered Mildred. "I am in no hurry to return to Nice."

The doctor led the way back to his house, the singer talking to Mildred with an excited air as they went, talking of the day when she was first soprano at Milan.

"Everybody envied me my success," she said. "There were those who said I owed everything to *him*, that he made my voice and my style. Lies, madame, black and bitter lies. I won all the prizes at the Conservatoire. He was one master among many. I owed him nothing—nothing—nothing!"

She reiterated the word with acrid emphasis, and an angry furl of her fan.

"Ah, now you are beginning the old strain!" said the doctor, with a good-humoured shrug of his shoulders. "If this goes on there shall be no piano for you to-day. I will have no grievances; grievances are the bane of social intercourse. If you come to my *salon* it must be to sing, not to reopen old sores. We all have our wounds as

well as you, signorina, but we keep them covered up."

"I am dumb," said the singer meekly.

They went into the doctor's private sitting-room. Three sides of the room were lined with books, chiefly of a professional or scientific character. A cottage piano stood in a recess by the fireplace. The woman flew to the instrument with a rapturous eagerness, and began to play. Her hands were faintly tremulous with excitement, but her touch was that of a master as she played the symphony to the finale of "La Cenerentola."

"Has she no piano in her own room?" asked Mildred in a whisper.

"No, poor soul. She is one of our pauper patients. The State provides for her, but it does not give her a private room or a piano. I let her come here two or three times a week for an hour or so, when she is reasonable."

Mildred wondered if it would be possible for her, as a stranger, to provide a room and a piano for this friendless enthusiast. She would have been glad out of her abundance to have lightened a

suffering sister's fate, and she determined to make the proposition to the doctor.

The singer played snatches of familiar music—Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini—operatic airs which Mildred knew by heart. She wandered from one scena to another, and her voice, though it had lost its sweetness and sustaining power, was still brilliantly flexible. She sang with a rapturous unconsciousness of her audience, Mildred and the doctor sitting quietly at each side of the hearth, where a single pine log smouldered on the iron dogs above a heap of white ashes.

Presently the music changed to a gayer, lighter strain, and she began an airy cavatina, all coquetry and grace. That joyous melody was curiously familiar to Mildred's ear.

"Where did I hear that music?" she said aloud. "It seems as if it were only the other day, and yet it is nearly two years since I was at the opera."

The singer left the cavatina unfinished, and wandered into another melody.

"Ah, I know now!" exclaimed Mildred; "that is Paolo Castellani's music!"

The woman started up from the piano as if the name had wounded her.

"Paolo Castellani!" she cried. "What do you know of Paolo Castellani?"

Dr. Leroy went over to her, and laid his hand upon her shoulder heavily.

"Now we are in for a scene," he muttered to Mildred. "You have mentioned a most unlucky name."

"What has she to do with Signor Castellani?"

"He was her cousin. He trained her for the stage, and she was the original in several of his operas. She was his slave, his creature, and lived only to please him. I suppose she expected him to marry her, poor soul; but he knew better than that. He contrived to fascinate a French girl, a consumptive, who was travelling in Italy for her health, with a wealthy father. He married the Frenchwoman; and I believe that marriage broke Maria's heart."

The singer had seated herself at the piano again, and was playing with rapid and brilliant finger, running up and down the keys in wild excitement.

Mildred and the physician were standing by the window, talking in lowered voices, unheeded by Maria Castellani.

"Was it that event which wrecked her mind?" asked Mildred, deeply interested.

"No, it was some years afterwards that her brain gave way. She had a brilliant career before her at the time of Castellani's desertion; and she bore the blow with the courage of a Roman. So long as her voice lasted, and the public were constant to her, she contrived to bear up against that burning sense of wrong which has been the distinguishing note of her mind ever since she came here. But the first breath of failure froze her. She felt her voice decaying while she was comparatively a young woman. Her glass told her that she was losing her beauty, that she was beginning to look old and haggard. Her managers told her more. They gave her the cold shoulder, and put newer singers above her head. Then despair took hold of her; she became gloomy and irritable, difficult and capricious in her dealings with her fellow-artists; and then came the end, and she was brought here. She had

saved no money. She had been reckless even beyond the habits of her profession. She was friendless. There was nobody interested in her fate—"

"Not even Signor Castellani?"

"Castellani—Paolo Castellani? *Pas si bête.* The man was a compound of selfishness and treachery. She was not likely to get pity from him. The very fact that he had used her badly made her loathsome to him. I doubt if he ever inquired what became of her. If any one had asked him about her, he would have said that she had dropped through—a worn-out voice, a faded beauty—*que voulez-vous?*"

"She had no other friends—no ties?"

"None. She was an orphan at twelve years old, without a sou. Castellani paid for her education, and traded upon her talent. He trained her to sing in his own operas, and in that light, fanciful music she was at her best; though it is her delusion now that she excelled in the grand style. I believe he absorbed the greater part of her earnings, until they quarrelled. Some time after his marriage there was a kind of reconciliation between them.

She appeared in a new opera—his last and worst. Her voice was going, his talent had begun to fail. It was the beginning of the end."

"Has Signor Castellani's son shown no interest in this poor creature's fate?"

"No; the son lives in England, I believe, for the most part. I doubt if he knows anything about Maria."

The singer had reverted to that familiar music. She sang the first part of an aria, a melody disguised with over-much fioritura, light, graceful, unmeaning.

"That is in his last opera," she said, rising from the piano, with a more rational air. "The opera was almost a failure; but I was applauded to the echo. His genius had forsaken him. Follies, follies, falsehoods, crimes. He could not be true to any one or anything. He was as false to his wife as he had been false to me, and to his proud young English signorina; ah, well! who can doubt that he lied to *her*?"

She fell into a meditative mood, standing by the piano, touching a note now and then.

"Young and handsome and rich. Would she have accepted degradation with open eyes? No, no, no. He lied to her as he had lied to me. He was made up of lies."

Her eyes grew troubled, and her lips worked convulsively. Again the doctor laid his strong broad hand upon her shoulder.

"Come, Maria," he said in Italian; "enough for to-day. Madame has been pleased with your singing."

"Yes, indeed, signora. You have a noble voice. I should be very glad if I could do anything to be of use to you; if I could contribute to your comfort in any way."

"O, Maria is happy enough with us, I hope," said the doctor cheerily. "We are all fond of her when she is reasonable. But it is time she went to her dinner. *A rivederci, signora.*"

Maria accepted her dismissal with a good grace, saluted Mildred and the doctor with her stage curtsy, and withdrew. One side of Monsieur Leroy's house opened into the garden, the other into a courtyard adjoining the high-road.

"Poor soul! I should be so glad to pay for a piano and a private sitting-room for her, if I might be allowed to do so," said Mildred, when the singer was gone.

"You are too generous, madame; but I doubt if it would be good for her to accept your bounty. She enjoys the occasional use of my piano intensely. If she had one always at her command, she would give up her life to music, which exercises too strong an influence upon her disordered brain to be indulged in *ad libitum*. Nor would a private apartment be an advantage in her case. She is too much given to brooding over past griefs; and the society of her fellow-sufferers, the friction and movement of the public life, are good for her."

"What did she mean by her talk of an English girl—some story of wrong-doing? Was it all imaginary?"

"I believe there was some scandal at Milan; some flirtation, or possibly an intrigue, between Castellani and one of his English pupils; but I never heard the details. Maria's jealousy would be likely to exaggerate the circumstances; for I believe

she adored her cousin to the last, long after she knew that he had never cared for her, except as an element in his success."

Mildred took leave of the doctor, after thanking him for his politeness. She left a handful of gold for the benefit of the poor patients, and left Dr. Leroy under the impression that she was one of the sweetest women he had ever met. Her pensive beauty, her low and musical voice, the clear and resolute purpose of every word and look, were in his mind indications of the perfection of womanhood.

"It is not often that Nature achieves such excellence," mused the doctor. "It is a pity that perfection should be short-lived; yet I cannot prognosticate length of years for this lady."

Pamela's spirits were decidedly improving. She talked all dinner-time, and gave a graphic description of her afternoon in the tennis-court behind the Cercle de la Méditerranée.

"I am to see the club-house some morning before the members begin to arrive," she said. "It is a perfectly charming club. There is a theatre,

which serves as a ballroom on grand occasions. There is to be a dance next week; and Lady Lochinvar will chaperon me, if you don't mind."

"I shall be most grateful to Lady Lochinvar, dear. Believe me, if I am a hermit, I don't want to keep you in melancholy seclusion. I am very glad for you to have pleasant friends."

"Mrs. Murray is delightful. She begged me to call her Jessie. She is going to take me for a drive before lunch to-morrow, and we are to do some shopping in the afternoon. The shops here are simply lovely."

"Almost as nice as Brighton?"

"Better. They have more *chic;* and I am told they are twice as dear."

"Was Mr. Stuart at the tennis-court?"

"Yes, he plays there every afternoon when he is not at Monte Carlo."

"That does not sound like a very useful existence."

"Perhaps you will say *he* is an adventurer," exclaimed Pamela, with a flash of temper; and then repenting in a moment, she added: "I beg your

pardon, aunt; but you are really wrong about Mr. Stuart. He looks after Lady Lochinvar's estate. He is invaluable to her."

"But he cannot do much for the estate when he is playing tennis here or gambling at Monte Carlo."

"O, but he does. He answers no end of letters every morning. Lady Lochinvar says he is a most wonderful young man. He attends to her house accounts here. I am afraid she would be very extravagant if she were not well looked after. She has no idea of business. Mr. Stuart has even to manage her dressmakers."

"Then one may suppose he is really useful—even at Nice. Has he any means of his own, or is he entirely dependent on his aunt?"

"O, he has an income of his own—a modest income, Mrs. Murray says, hardly enough for him to get along easily in a cavalry regiment, but quite enough for him as a civilian; and his aunt will leave him everything. His expectations are splendid."

"Well, Pamela, I will not call *him* an adven-

turer, and I shall be pleased to make his acquaintance, if he will call upon me."

"He is dying to know you. May Mrs. Murray bring him to tea to-morrow afternoon?"

"With pleasure."

CHAPTER II

IN THE MORNING OF LIFE.

George Greswold succumbed to Fate. He had done all he could do in the way of resistance. He had appealed against his wife's decision; he had set love against principle or prejudice, and principle, as Mildred understood it, had been too strong for love; so there was nothing left for the forsaken husband but submission. He went back to the home in which he had once been happy, and he sat down amidst the ruins of his domestic life; he sat by his desolate hearth through the long dull wintry months, and he made no effort to bring brightness or variety into his existence. He made no stand against unmerited misfortune.

"I am too old to forget," he told himself; "that lesson can only be learnt in youth."

A young man might have gone out as a wanderer—might have sought excitement and distrac-

tion amidst strange cities and strange races of men; might have found forgetfulness in danger and hardship, the perils of unexplored deserts, the hazards of untrodden mountains, the hairbreadth escapes of savage life, pestilence, famine, warfare. George Greswold felt no inclination for any such adventure. The mainspring of life had snapped, and he admitted to himself that he was a broken man.

He sat by the hearth in his gloomy library day after day, and night after night, until the small hours. Sometimes he took his gun in the early morning, and went out with a leash of dogs for an hour or two of solitary shooting among his own covers. He tramped his copses in all weathers and at all hours, but he rarely went outside his own domain; nor did he ever visit his cottagers or small tenantry, with whom he had been once so familiar a friend. All interest in his estate had gone from him after his daughter's death. He left everything to the new steward, who was happily both competent and honest.

His books were his only friends. Those studious habits acquired years before, when he was compara-

tively a poor man, stood by him now. His one distraction, his only solace, was found in the contents of those capacious bookshelves, three-fourths of which were filled with volumes of his own selection, the gradual accumulation of his sixteen years of ownership. His grandfather's library, which constituted the remaining fourth, consisted of those admirable standard works, in the largest possible number of volumes, which formed an item in the furniture of a respectable house during the last century, and which, from the stiffness of their bindings and the unblemished appearance of their paper and print, would seem to have enjoyed an existence of dignified retirement from the day they left the bookseller's shop.

But for those long tramps in the wintry copses, where holly and ivy showed brightly green amidst leafless chestnuts and hazels—but for those communings with the intellect of past and present in the long still winter evenings, George Greswold's brain must have given way under the burden of an undeserved sorrow. As it was, he contrived to live on, peacefully, and even with an air of contentment.

His servants surprised him in no paroxysm of grief. He startled them with no strange exclamations. His manner gave no cause for alarm. He accepted his lot in silence and submission. His days were ordered with a simple regularity, so far as the service of the house went. His valet and butler agreed that he was in all things an admirable master.

The idea in the household was that Mrs. Greswold had "taken to religion." That seemed the only possible explanation for a parting which had been preceded by no domestic storms, for which there was no apparent cause in the conduct of the husband. That idea of the wife having discovered an intrigue of her husband's, which Louisa had discussed in the housekeeper's room at Brighton, was no longer entertained in the servants'-hall at Enderby.

"If there had been anything of that kind, something would have come out by this time," said the butler, who had a profound belief in the ultimate "coming out" of all social mysteries.

George Greswold was not kept in ignorance of his wife's movements. Pamela had been shrewd

enough to divine that her uncle would be glad to hear from her in order to hear of Mildred, and she had written to him from time to time, giving him a graphic account of her own and her aunt's existence.

There had been only one suppression. The young lady had not once alluded to Castellani's share in their winter life at Pallanza. She had a horror of arousing that dragon of suspicion which she knew to lurk in the minds of all uncles with reference to all agreeable young men. George Greswold had not heard from his niece for more than a fortnight, when there came a letter, written the day after Mildred's visit to the madhouse, and full of praises of Lady Lochinvar and the climate of Nice. That letter was the greatest shock that Greswold had received since his wife had left him, for it told him that she was in a place where she could scarcely fail to discover all the details of his wretched story. He had kept it locked from her, he had shut himself behind a wall of iron, he had kept a silence as of the grave; and now she from whom he had prayed that his fatal story might be for ever hidden was certain to learn the worst.

"Aunt went to lunch with Lady Lochinvar the day after our arrival," wrote Pamela. "She spent a long morning with her, and then went for a drive somewhere in the environs, and was out till nearly dinner-time. She looked so white and fagged when she came back, poor dear, and I am sure she had done too much for one day. Lady Lochinvar asked me to dinner, and took me to the new Opera-house, which is lovely. Her nephew was with us—rather plain, and with no taste for music (he said he preferred *Madame Angot* to *Lohengrin*), but enormously clever, I am told, in a solid, practical kind of way."

Und so weiter, for three more pages.

Mildred had been with Lady Lochinvar—with Lady Lochinvar, who knew all; who had seen him and his wife together; had received them both as her friends; had been confided in, he knew, by that fond, jealous wife; made the recipient of tearful doubts and hysterical accusations. Vivien had owned as much to him.

She had been with Lady Lochinvar, who must know the history of his wife's death and the dreadful charge brought against him; who must know that

he had been an inmate of the great white barrack on the road to St. André; who in all probability thought him guilty of murder. All the barriers had fallen now; all the floodgates had opened. He saw himself hateful, monstrous, inhuman, in the eyes of the woman he adored.

"She loved her sister with an inextinguishable love," he thought, "and she sees me now as her sister's murderer—the cold-blooded, cruel husband, who made his wife's existence miserable, and ended by killing her in a paroxysm of brutal rage: that is the kind of monster I must seem in my Mildred's eyes. She will look back upon my stubborn silence, my gloomy reserve, and she will see all the indications of guilt. My own conduct will condemn me."

As he sat by his solitary hearth in the cold March evening, the large reading-lamp making a circle of light amidst the gloom, George Greswold's mind travelled over the days of his youth, and the period of that fatal marriage which had blighted him in the morning of his life, which blighted him now in life's meridian, when, but for this dark

influence, all the elements of happiness were in his hand.

He looked back to the morning of life, and saw himself full of ambitious plans and aspiring dreams, well content to be the younger son, to whom it was given to make his own position in the world, scorning the idle days of a fox-hunting squire, resolute to become an influence for good among his fellow-men. He had never envied his brother the inheritance of the soil; he had thought but little of his own promised inheritance of Enderby.

Unhappily that question of the succession to the Enderby estate had been a sore point with Squire Ransome. He adored his elder son, who was like him in character and person, and he cared very little for George, whom he considered a bookish and unsympathetic individual; a young man who hardly cared whether there were few or many foxes in the district, whether the young partridges throve, or perished by foul weather or epidemic disease—a young man who took no interest in the things that filled the lives of other people. In a word, George was not a sportsman; and that deficiency made him

an alien to his father's race. There had never been a Ransome who was not "sporting" to the core of his heart until the appearance of this pragmatical Oxonian.

Without being in any manner scientific or a student of evolution, Mr. Ransome had a fixed belief in heredity. It was the duty of the son to resemble the father; and a son who was in all his tastes and inclinations a distinct variety stamped himself as undutiful.

"I don't suppose the fellow can help it," said Mr. Ransome testily; "but there's hardly a remark he makes which doesn't act upon my nerves like a nutmeg-grater."

Nobody would have given the Squire credit for possessing very sensitive nerves, but everybody knew he had a temper, and a temper which occasionally showed itself in violent outbreaks — the kind of temper which will dismiss a household at one fell swoop, send a stud of horses to Tattersall's on the spur of the moment, tear up a lease on the point of signature, or turn a son out of doors.

The knowledge that this unsportsmanlike son

of his would inherit the fine estate of Enderby was a constant source of vexation to Squire Ransome of Mapledown. The dream of his life was that Mapledown and Enderby should be united in the possession of his son Randolph. The two properties would have made Randolph rich enough to hope for a peerage, and that idea of a possible peerage dazzled the Tory squire. His family had done the State some service; had sat for important boroughs; had squandered much money upon contested elections; had been staunch in times of change and difficulty. There was no reason why a Ransome should not ascend to the Upper House, in these days when peerages are bestowed so much more freely than in the time of Pitt and Fox. The two estates would have made an important property under one ownership; divided, they were only respectable. And what the Squire most keenly felt was the fact that Enderby was by far the finer property, and that his younger son must ultimately be a much richer man than his brother. The Sussex estate had dwindled considerably in those glorious days of contested elections and party feeling; the Hampshire estate was

intact. Mr. Ransome could not forgive his wife for her determination that the younger son should be her heir. He always shuffled uneasily upon his seat in the old family pew when the 27th chapter of Genesis was read in the Sunday morning service. He compared his wife to Rebecca. He asked the Vicar at luncheon on one of those Sundays what he thought of the conduct of Rebecca and Jacob in that very shady transaction, and the Vicar replied in the orthodox fashion, favouring Jacob just as Rebecca had favoured him.

"I can't understand it," exclaimed the Squire testily; "the whole business is against my idea of honour and honesty. I wouldn't have such a fellow as Jacob for my steward if he were the cleverest man in Sussex. And look you here, Vicar. If Jacob was right, and knew he was right, why the deuce was he so frightened the first time he met Esau after that ugly business? Take my word for it, Jacob was a sneak, and Providence punished him rightly with a desolate old age and a quarrelsome family."

The Vicar looked down at his plate, sighed gently, and held his peace.

The time came when the growing feeling of aversion on the father's part showed itself in outrage and insult which the son could not endure. George remonstrated against certain acts of injustice in the management of the estate. He pleaded the cause of tenant against landlord—a dire offence in the eyes of the Tory Squire. There came an open rupture; and it was impossible for the younger son to remain any longer under the father's roof. His mother loved him devotedly, but she felt that it was better for him to go; and so it was settled, in loving consultation between mother and son, that he should carry out a long-cherished wish of his Oxford days, and explore all that was historical and interesting in Southern Europe, seeing men and cities in a leisurely way, and devoting himself to literature in the meantime. He had already written for some of the high-class magazines; and he felt that it was in him to do well as a writer of the serious order—critic, essayist, and thinker.

His mother gave him three hundred a year, which, for a young man of his simple habits, was ample. He told himself that he should be able to

earn as much again by his pen; and so, after a farewell of decent friendliness to his father and his brother Randolph, and tenderest parting with his mother, he set out upon his pilgrimage, a free agent, with the world all before him. He explored Greece—dwelling fondly upon all the old traditions, the old histories. He made the acquaintance of Dr. Schliemann, and entered heart and soul into that gentleman's views. This occupied him more than a year, for those scenes exercised a potent fascination upon a mind to which Greek literature was the supreme delight. He spent a month at Constantinople, and a winter in Corfu and Cyprus; he devoted a summer to Switzerland, and did a little mountaineering; and during all his wanderings he contrived to give a considerable portion of his time to literature.

It was after his Swiss travels that he went to Italy, and established himself in Florence for a quiet winter. He hired an apartment on a fourth floor of a palace overlooking the Arno, and here, for the first time since he had left England, he went a little into general society. His mother had sent

him letters of introduction to old friends of her own, English and Florentine; he was young, handsome, and a gentleman, and he was received with enthusiasm. Had he been fond of society he might have been at parties every night; but he was fonder of books and of solitude, and he took very little advantage of people's friendliness.

The few houses to which he went were houses famous for good music, and it was in one of these houses that he met Vivien Faux.

It was in the midst of a symphony by Beethoven, while he was standing on the edge of the crowd which surrounded the open space given to the instrumentalists, that he first saw the woman who was to be his wife. She was sitting in the recess of a lofty window, quite apart from the throng—a pale, dark-eyed girl, with roughened hair carelessly heaped above her low, broad forehead. Her slender figure and sloping shoulders showed to advantage in a low-necked black gown, without a vestige of ornament. She wore neither jewels nor flowers, at an assembly where gems were sparkling and flowers breathing sweetness upon every feminine bosom.

Her thin, white arms hung loosely in her lap; her back was turned to the performers, and her eyes were averted from the crowd. She looked the image of *ennui* and indifference.

He found his hostess directly the symphony was over, and asked her to introduce him to the young lady in black velvet yonder, sitting alone in the window.

"Have you been struck by Miss Faux's rather singular appearance?" asked Signora Vicenti. "She is not so handsome as many young ladies who are here to-night."

"No, she is not handsome, but her face interests me. She looks as if she had suffered some great disappointment."

"I believe her whole life has been a disappointment. She is an orphan, and, as far as I can ascertain, a friendless orphan. She has good means, but there is a mystery about her position which places her in a manner apart from other girls of her age. She has no relations to whom to refer, no family home to which to return. She is here with some rather foolish people—an English artist and his

wife, who cannot do very much for her, and I believe she keenly feels her isolation. It makes her bitter against other girls, and she loses friends as fast as she makes them. People won't put up with her tongue. Well, Mr. Ransome, do you change your mind after that?"

"On the contrary, I feel so much the more interested in the young lady."

"Ah, your interest will not last. However, I shall be charmed to introduce you."

They went across the room to that distant recess where Miss Faux was still seated, her hair and attitude unchanged since George Ransome first observed her. She started with a little look of surprise when Signora Vicenti and her companion approached; but she accepted the introduction with a nonchalant air, and she replied to Ransome's opening remarks with manifest indifference. Then by degrees she grew more animated, and talked about the people in the room, ridiculing their pretensions, their eccentricities, their costume.

"You are not an *habitué* here?" she asked. "I don't remember seeing you before to-night."

"No; it is the first of Signora Vicenti's parties that I have seen."

"Then I conclude it will be the last."

"Why?"

"O, no sensible person would come a second time. The music is tolerable if one could hear it anywhere else, but the people are odious."

"Yet I conclude this is not your first evening here?"

"No; I come every week. I have nothing else to do with myself but to go about to houses I hate, and mix with people who hate me."

"Why should they hate you?"

"O, we all hate each other, and want to overreach one another. Envy and malice are in the air. Picture to yourself fifty manœuvring mothers with a hundred marriageable daughters, most of them portionless, and about twenty eligible men. Think how ferocious the competition must be!"

"But you are independent of all that; you are outside the arena."

"Yes; I have nothing to do with their slave-market, but they hate me all the same; perhaps

because I have a little more money than most of them; perhaps because I am nobody—a waif and stray—able to give no account of my existence."

She spoke of her position with a reckless candour that shocked him.

"There is something to bear in every lot," he said, trying to be philosophical.

"I suppose so, but I only care about my own burden. Please, don't pretend that you do either. I should despise a man who pretended not to be selfish."

"Do you think that all men are selfish?"

"I have never seen any evidence to the contrary. The man I thought the noblest and the best did me the greatest wrong it was possible to do me, in order to spare himself trouble."

Ransome was silent. He would not enter into the discussion of a past history of which he was ignorant, and which was doubtless full of pain.

After this he met her very often, and while other young men avoided her on account of her bitter tongue, he showed a preference for her society, and encouraged her to confide in him. She went every-

where, chaperoned by Mr. Mortimer, a dreary twaddler, who was for ever expounding theories of art which he had picked up, parrot-wise, in a London art-school thirty years before. His latest ideas were coeval with Maclise and Mulready. Mrs. Mortimer was by way of being an invalid, and sat and nursed her neuralgia at home, while her husband and Miss Faux went into society.

It was at the beginning of spring that an American lady of wealth and standing invited the Mortimers and their *protégée* to a picnic, to which Mr. Ransome was also bidden; and it was this picnic which sealed George Ransome's fate. Pity for Vivien's lonely position had grown into a sincere regard. He had discovered warm feelings under that cynical manner, a heart capable of a profound affection. She had talked to him of a child, a kind of adopted sister, whom she had passionately loved, and from whom she had been parted by the selfish cruelty of the little girl's parents.

"My school-life in England had soured me before then," she said, "and I was not a very amiable person even at fifteen years old; but *that*

cruelty finished me. I have hated my fellow-creatures ever since."

He pleaded against this wholesale condemnation.

"You were unlucky," he said, "in encountering unworthy people."

"Ah, but one of those people, the child's father, had seemed to me the best of men. I had believed in him as second only to God in benevolence and generosity. When *he* failed I renounced my belief in human goodness."

Unawares, George Ransome had fallen into the position of her confidant and friend. From friendship to love was an easy transition; and a few words, spoken at random during a ramble on an olive-clad hill, bound him to her for ever. Those unpremeditated words loosed the fountain of tears, and he saw the most scornful of women, the woman who affected an absolute aversion for his sex, and a contempt for those weaker sisters who waste their love upon such vile clay—he saw her abandon herself to a passion of tears at the first word of affection which he had ever addressed to her. He had spoken as a friend rather than as a lover; but those tears bound him to

her for life. He put his arm round her, and pillowed the small pale face upon his breast, the dark impassioned eyes looking up at him drowned in tears.

"You should not have said those words," she sobbed. "You cannot understand what it is to have lived as I have lived—a creature apart—unloved—unvalued. O, is it true?—do you really care for me?"

"With all my heart," he answered, and in good faith.

His profound compassion took the place of love; and in that moment he believed that he loved her as a man should love the woman whom he chooses for his wife.

They were married within a month from that March afternoon; and for some time their married life was happy. He wished to take her to England, but she implored him to abandon that idea.

"In England everybody would want to know who I am," she said. "I should be tortured by questions about 'my people.' Abroad, society is less exacting."

He deferred to her in this, as he would have done in any other matter which involved her happiness. They spent the first half-year of their married life in desultory wanderings in the Oberland and the Engadine, and then settled at Nice for the winter.

Here Mrs. Ransome met Lady Lochinvar, whom she had known at Florence, and was at once invited to the Palais Montano; and here for the first time appeared those clouds which were too soon to darken George Ransome's domestic horizon.

There were many beautiful women at Nice that winter: handsome Irish girls, vivacious Americans, Frenchwomen, and Englishwomen; and among so many who were charming there were some whom George Ransome did not scruple to admire, with as much frankness as he would have admired a face by Guido or Raffaelle. He was slow to perceive his wife's distrust, could hardly bring himself to believe that she could be jealous of him; but he was not suffered to remain long in this happy ignorance. A hysterical outburst one night after their return from a ball at the Club-house opened the husband's eyes. The demon of jealousy stood revealed; and

from that hour the angel of domestic peace was banished from George Ransome's hearth.

He struggled against that evil influence. He exercised patience, common sense, forbearance; but in vain. There were lulls in the storm sometimes, delusive calms; and he hoped the demon was exorcised. And then came a worse outbreak; more hysterics; despairing self-abandonment; threats of suicide. He bore it as long as he could, and ultimately, his wife's health offering an excuse for such a step, he proposed that they should leave Nice, and take a villa in the environs, in some quiet spot where they might live apart from all society.

Vivien accepted the proposition with rapture; she flung herself at her husband's feet, and covered his hands with tearful kisses.

"O, if I could but believe that you still love me, that you are not weary of me," she exclaimed, "I should be the happiest woman in the universe."

They spent a week of halcyon peace, driving about in quest of their new home. They explored the villages within ten miles of Nice, they breakfasted at village restaurants, in the sunny March noontide,

and finally they settled upon a villa at St. Jean, within an hour's drive of the great white city, and to this new home they went at the end of the month, after bidding adieu to their friends in Nice.

CHAPTER III.

THE RIFT IN THE LUTE.

The villa was built on a ledge of ground between the road and the sea. There was a stone terrace in front of the windows of *salon* and dining-room, below which the ground shelved steeply down to the rocks and the blue water. The low irregular-shaped house was screened from the road by a grove of orange and lemon trees, with a peach or a cherry here and there to give variety of colour. In one corner there was a whole cluster of peach-trees, which made a mass of purplish-pinky bloom. The ridges of garden sloping down from the stone terrace were full of white stocks and scarlet anemones. Clusters of red ranunculus made spots of flame in the sun, and the young leaves in the long hedge of Dijon roses wove an interlacing screen of crimson, through which the sun shone as through old ruby glass in a cathedral window. Everywhere

there was a feast of perfume and colour and beauty. The little bay, the curving pier, the white-sailed boats, which, seen from the height above, looked no bigger than the gulls skimming across the blue; the quaint old houses of Villefranche on a level with the water, and rising tier above tier to the crest of the hill—pink and blue houses, white and cream-coloured houses, with pea-green shutters and red roofs. Far away to the left, the jutting promontory and the tall white lighthouse; and away southward, the sapphire sea, touched with every changing light and shadow. And this lovely little world at George Ransome's feet, this paradise in miniature, was all the lovelier because of the great rugged mountain-wall behind it, the bare red and yellow hills baked in the sunlight of ages, the strange old-world villages yonder high up on the stony flanks of the hills, the far-away church towers, from which faint sound of bells came now and again as if from fairyland.

It was a delicious spot this little village of St. Jean, to which the Niçois came on Sundays and holidays, to eat bouillabaisse at the rustic tavern or to picnic in the shade of century-old olives and old

carouba-trees, which made dark masses of foliage between the road and the sea. George Ransome loved the place, and could have been happy there if his wife would only have allowed him; but those halcyon days which marked the beginning of their retirement were too soon ended; and clouds lowered again over the horizon—clouds of doubt and discontent. There are women to whom domestic peace, a calm and rational happiness, is an impossibility, and Vivien was one of these women.

From the beginning her suspicious nature had been on the watch for some hidden evil. She had a fixed idea that the Fates had marked her for misery, and she would not open her heart to the sunlight of happiness.

Was her husband unkind to her? No, he was all kindness; but to her his kindness seemed only a gentleman-like form of toleration. He had married her out of pity; and it was pity that made him kind. Other women were worshipped. It was her fate to be tolerated by a man she adored.

She could never forget her own passionate folly, her own unwomanly forwardness. She had thrown

herself into his arms—she who should have waited to be wooed, and should have made herself precious by the difficulty with which she was won.

"How can he help holding me cheap?" she asked herself—"I who cost him nothing, not even an hour of doubt? From the hour we first met he must have known that I adored him."

Once when he was rowing her about the bay in the westering sunlight, while the fishermen were laying down their lines, or taking up their baskets here and there by the rocks, she asked him suddenly,

"What did you think of me, George, the first time you saw me—that night at Signora Vicenti's party? Come, be candid. You can afford to tell me the truth now. Your fate is sealed; you have nothing to lose or to gain."

"Do you think I would tell you less or more than the truth under any circumstances, Viva?" he asked gravely.

"O, you are horribly exact, I know!" she answered, with an impatient movement of her slender sloping shoulders, not looking at him, but with her dark dreamy eyes gazing far off across the bay

towards the distant point where the twin towers of Monaco Cathedral showed faint in the distance, "but perhaps if the truth sounded very rude you might suppress it—out of pity."

"I don't think the truth need sound rude."

"Well," still more impatiently, "what impression did I make upon you?"

"You must consider that there were at least fifty young ladies in Signora Vicenti's *salons* that evening."

"And about thirty old women; and I was lost in the crowd."

"Not quite lost. I remember being attracted by a young lady who sat in a window niche apart—"

"Like 'Brunswick's fated chieftain.' Pray go on."

"And who seemed a little out of harmony with the rest of the company. Her manner struck me as unpleasantly ironical, but her small pale face interested me, and I even liked the mass of towzled hair brushed up from her low square forehead. I liked her black velvet gown, without any colour or

ornament. It set off the thin white shoulders and long slender throat."

"Did you think I was rich or poor, somebody or nobody?"

"I thought you were a clever girl, soured by some kind of disappointment."

"And you felt sorry for me. Say you felt sorry for me!" she cried, her eyes coming back from the distant promontory, and fixing him suddenly, bright, keen, imperious in their eager questioning.

"Yes, I confess to feeling very sorry for you."

"Did I not know as much? From the very first you pitied me. Pity, pity! What an intolerable burden it is! I have bent under it all my life."

"My dear Viva, what nonsense you talk! Because I had mistaken ideas about you that first night, when we were strangers—"

"You were not mistaken. I was soured. I had been disappointed. My thoughts were bitter as gall. I had no patience with other girls who had so many blessings that I had never known. I saw them making light of their advantages, peevish, ill-tempered, self-indulgent; and I scorned them. Con-

tempt for others was the only comfort of my barren life. And so my vinegar tongue disgusted you, did it not?"

"I was not disgusted—concerned and interested, rather. Your conversation was original. I wanted to know more of you."

"Did you think me pretty?"

"I was more impressed by your mental gifts than your physical—"

"That is only a polite way of saying you thought me plain."

"Viva, you know better than that. If I thought of your appearance at all during that first meeting, be assured I thought you interesting—yes, and pretty. Only prettiness is a poor word to express a face that is full of intellect and originality."

"You thought me pale, faded, haggard, old for my age," she said decisively. "Don't deny it. You must have seen what my glass had been telling me for the last year."

"I thought your face showed traces of suffering."

This was one of many such conversations, full of keen questioning on her part, with an assumed

lightness of manner which thinly veiled the irritability of her mind. She had changed for the worse since they left Nice; she had grown more sensitive, more suspicious, more irritable. She was in a condition of health in which many women are despondent or irritable—in which with some women life seems one long disgust, and all things are irksome, even the things that have been pleasantest and most alued before—even the aspect of a lovely landscape the phrases of a familiar melody, the perfume of a once favourite flower. He tried to cheer her by talking of their future, the time to come when there would be a new bond between them, a new interest in their lives; but she saw all things in a gloomy atmosphere.

"Who knows?" she said. "I may die, perhaps; or you may love your child better than you have ever loved me, and then I should hate it."

"Viva, you cannot doubt that my love for our child will strengthen my love for you."

"Will it?" she asked incredulously. "God knows it needs strengthening."

This was hard upon a man whose tenderness

and indulgence had been boundless, who had done all that chivalry and a sense of duty can do to atone for the lack of love. He had tried his uttermost to conceal the one bitter truth that love was wanting: but those keen eyes of hers had seen the gap between them, that sensitive ear had discovered the rift in the lute.

One afternoon they climbed the hill to the breezy common on which the lighthouse stands, and dawdled about in the sunshine, gathering the pale gray rosemary bloom and the perfumed thyme which grow among those hollows and hillocks in such wild luxuriance. They were sauntering near the carriage-road, talking very little—she feeble and tired, although it was her own fancy to have walked so far—when they saw a carriage driving towards them—a large landau, with the usual bony horses and shabby jingling harness, and the usual sunburnt good-tempered driver.

Two girls in white gowns and Leghorn hats were in the carriage, with an elderly woman in black. Their laps were full of wild flowers, and branches of wild cherry and pear blossom filled the leather hood

at the back of the carriage. They were talking and laughing gaily, all animation and high spirits, as they drew near; and at sight of George Ransome one of them waved her hand in greeting, and called to the driver to stop. They were two handsome Irish girls who had made a sensation at the Battle of Flowers six weeks before. They were spoken of by some people as the belles of Nice. Mr. Ransome had pelted them with Parma violets and yellow rosebuds on the Promenade des Anglais, as they drove up and down in a victoria embowered in white stocks and narcissi. He had waltzed with them at the Cercle de la Méditerranée and the Palais Montano; had admired them frankly and openly, not afraid to own even to a jealous wife that he thought them beautiful.

Delia Darcy, the elder and handsomer of the two, leaned over the carriage-door to shake hands with him, while Vivien stood aloof, on a grassy knoll above the road, looking daggers. What right had they to stop their carriage and waylay her husband?

"Who would have thought of finding you in this out-of-the-way spot?" exclaimed Miss Darcy; "we

fancied you had left the Riviera. Are you stopping at Monte Carlo?"

"No, I have taken a villa at St. Jean."

"Is that near here?"

"Very near. You must have skirted the village in driving up here. And has Nice been very gay since we left?"

"No; people have been going away, and we have missed you dreadfully at the opera, and at dances, and at Rumpelmeyer's. What could have induced you to bury yourself alive in a village?" she asked vivaciously, with that sparkling manner which gives an air of flirtation to the most commonplace talk.

"My wife has been out of health, and it has suited us both to live quietly."

"Poor Mrs. Ransome—poor you!" exclaimed Miss Darcy, with a sigh. "O, there she is! How do you do, Mrs. Ransome?" gesticulating with a pretty little hand in a long wrinkled tan glove. "Do come and talk to us."

Mrs. Ransome bowed stiffly, but did not move an inch. She stood picking a branch of rosemary to shreds with nervous restless fingers, scattering the

poor pale blue-gray blossoms as if she were sprinkling them upon a corpse. The two girls took no further notice of her, but both bent forward, talking to Ransome, rattling on about this ball and the other ball, and a breakfast, and sundry afternoon teas, and the goings-on—audacious for the most part—of all the smart people at Nice. They had worlds to tell him, having taken it into their heads that he was a humorist, a cynic, who delighted in hearing of the follies of his fellow-man. He stood with his hat off, waiting for the carriage to drive on, inwardly impatient of delay, knowing with what jealous feelings Vivien had always regarded Delia Darcy, dreading a fit of ill-temper when the Irish girls should have vanished by and by below the sandy edge of the common. He listened almost in silence, giving their loquacity no more encouragement than good manners obliged.

"Why don't you come to the next dance at the Cercle de la Méditerranée?" said Delia coaxingly; "there are so few good dancers left, and your step is just the one that suits me best. There are to be amateur theatricals to begin with—scenes from

Much Ado; and I am to be Beatrice. Won't that tempt you?" she asked, with the insolence of an acknowledged beauty, spoiled by the laxer manners of a foreign settlement, lolling back in the carriage, and smiling at him with brilliant Irish gray eyes, under the shadow of her Leghorn hat, with a great cluster of daffodils just above her forehead, the yellow bloom showing vividly against her dark hair.

The other sister was only a paler reflection of this one, and echoed her speeches, laughing when she laughed.

"Surely you will come to see Delia act Beatrice?" she said. "I can't tell you how well she does it. Sir Randall Spofforth is the Benedict."

"My dears, we shall have no time to dress for dinner!" expostulated the duenna, feeling that this kind of thing had lasted long enough. "*En avant, cocher.*"

"Won't you come?" pleaded the pertinacious Delia; "it is on the twenty-ninth, remember—next Thursday week."

The carriage rolled slowly onward.

"I regret that I shall not be there," said Ransome decisively.

Delia shook her parasol at him in pretended anger.

He rejoined his wife. She stood surrounded by the shreds of rosemary and thyme which she had plucked and scattered while he was talking. She was very pale; and he knew only too well that she was very angry.

"Come, Viva, it is time we turned homeward," he said.

"Yes, the sun has gone down, has it not?" she exclaimed mockingly, as she looked after the carriage, which sank below the ragged edge of heather and thyme yonder, as if it had dropped over the cliff.

"Why, my love, the sun is above our heads!"

"Is it? *Your* sun is gone down, anyhow. She is very lovely, is she not?"

The question was asked with sudden eagerness, as if her life depended upon the reply. She was walking quickly in her agitation, going down the hill much faster than she had mounted it.

"Yes, they are both handsome girls, feather-headed, but remarkably handsome," her husband answered carelessly.

"But Delia is the lovelier. *She* is your divinity."

"Yes, she is the lovelier. The other seems a copy by an inferior hand."

"And she is so fond of you. It was cruel to refuse her request, when she pleaded so hard."

"How can you be so foolish or so petty, Vivien? Is it impossible for me to talk for five minutes with a handsome girl without unreasonable anger on your part?"

"Do you expect me to be pleased or happy when I see your admiration of another woman—admiration you do not even take the trouble to conceal? Do you suppose I can ever forget last winter—how I have seen you dancing with that girl night after night? Yes, I have had to sit and watch you. I was not popular, I had few partners; and it is bad form to dance more than once with one's husband. I have seen her in your arms, with her head almost lying on your shoulder, again and again, as if it

were her natural place. 'What a handsome couple!' I have heard people say; 'are they engaged?' Do you think *that* was pleasant for me?"

"You had but to say one word, and I would have left off dancing for ever."

"Another sacrifice—like your marriage."

"Vivien, you would provoke a saint."

"Yes, it is provoking to be chained to one woman when you are dying for another."

"How much oftener am I to swear to you that I don't care a straw for Miss Darcy?"

"Never again," she answered. "I love you too well to wish you to swear a lie."

They had come down from the common by this time, and were now upon a pathway nearer home—a narrow footpath on the edge of the cliff opposite Beaulieu; the gently-curving bay below them, and behind and above them orchards and gardens, hill and lighthouse. It was one of their chosen walks. They had paced the narrow path many an afternoon when the twin towers of Monaco showed dark in the shadow of sundown.

"Vivien, I think you are the most difficult crea-

ture to live with that ever a man had for his wife," said Ransome, stung to the quick by her persistent perversity.

"I am difficult to live with, am I?" she cried. "Why don't you go a step further—why don't you say at once that you wish I were dead?" she cried, with a wild burst of passion. "Say that you wish me dead."

"I own that when you torment me, as you are doing to-day, I have sometimes thought of death—yours or mine—as the only escape from mutual misery," he answered gloomily.

He had been sauntering a few paces in front of her along the narrow path between the olive-garden and the edge of the cliff, she following slowly—both in a desultory way, and talking to each other without seeing each other's face. The cliff sank sheer below the pathway, with only a narrow margin of rushy grass between the footpath and the brink of the precipice. It was no stupendous depth, no giddy height from which the eye glanced downward, sickening at the horror of the gulf. One looked down at the jewel-bright waves and the many-hued rocks,

the fir-trees growing out of the crags, without a thought of danger; and yet a false step upon those sunburnt rushes might mean instant death.

He came to a sudden standstill after that last speech, and stood leaning with both hands upon his stick, angry, full of gloom, feeling that he had said a cruel thing, yet not repenting of his cruelty. He stood there expectant of her angry answer; but there was only silence.

Silence, and then a swift rushing sound, like the flight of a great bird. He looked round, and saw that he was alone!

CHAPTER IV.

DARKNESS.

She had flung herself over the cliff. That rustling noise was the sound of her gown as it brushed against the rushes and seedling firs that clothed the precipice with verdure. He looked over the cliff, and saw her lying among the rocks, a white motionless figure, mangled and crushed, dumb and dead, his victim and his accuser.

His first impulse was to fling himself over the edge where she had cast away her life a minute ago; but common sense overcame that movement of despair. A few yards further towards the point the side of the cliff was less precipitous. There were jutting ledges of rock and straggling bushes by which a good climber might let himself down to the beach, not without hazard, but with a fair chance of safety. As he scrambled downward he saw a fisherman's boat shooting across the bay, and he thought

that his wife's fall had been seen from the narrow strip of sandy shore yonder towards Beaulieu.

She was lying on her side among the low wet slabs of rock, the blue water lapping round her. There was blood upon her face, and on one mangled arm, from which the muslin sleeve was ripped. Her gown had caught in the bushes, and was torn to shreds; and the water flowing so gently in and out among her loosened hair was tinged with blood.

Her eyes were wide open, staring wildly, and they had a glassy look already. He knew that she was dead.

"Did you see her fall?" he asked the men in the boat, as they came near.

"No," said one. "I heard the gulls scream, and I knew there was something. And then I looked about and saw something white lying there, under the cliff."

They lifted her gently into the boat, and laid her on a folded sail at the bottom, as gently and as tenderly as if she were still capable of feeling, as if she were not past cure. George Ransome asked no question, invited no opinion. He sat in the stern

of the boat, dumb and quiet. The horror of this sudden doom had paralysed him. What had he done that this thing should happen, this wild revenge of a woman's passionate heart which made him a murderer? What had he done? Had he not been patient and forbearing, indulgent beyond the common indulgence of husbands to fretful wives? Had he not blunted the edge of wrath with soft answers? Had he not been affectionate and considerate even when love was dead? And yet because of one hard speech, wrung from his irritated nerves, this wild creature had slain herself.

The two fishermen looked at him curiously. He saw the dark southern eyes watching him; saw gravity and restraint upon those fine olive faces which had been wont to beam with friendly smiles. He knew that they suspected evil, but he was in no mood to undeceive them. He sat in an apathetic silence, motionless, stupefied almost, while the men rowed slowly round the point in the golden light of sundown. He scarcely looked at that white still figure lying at the bottom of the boat, the face hidden under a scarlet kerchief which one of the men

had taken from his neck. He sat staring at the rocky shore, the white gleaming lighthouse, the long ridge of heathy ground on the crest of the hill, the villas, the gardens with their glow of light and colour, the dark masses of foliage clustering here and there amidst the bright-hued rocks. He looked at everything except his dead wife, lying almost at his feet.

There was an inquiry that evening before the Juge d'Instruction at Villefranche, and he was made to give an account of his wife's death. He proved a very bad witness. The minute and seemingly frivolous questions addled his brain. He told the magistrate how he had looked round and found the path empty: but he could not say how his wife had fallen—whether she had flung herself over the edge or had fallen accidentally, whether her foot had slipped unawares, whether she had fallen face forward, or whether she had dropped backwards from the edge of the cliff.

"I tell you again that I did not see her fall," he protested impatiently.

"Did you usually walk in advance of your wife?" asked the Frenchman. "It was not very polite to turn your back upon a lady."

"I was worried, and out of temper."

"For what reason?"

"My wife's unhappy jealousy created reasons where there were none. The people who know me know that I was not habitually unkind to her."

"Yet you gave her an answer which so maddened her that she flung herself over the cliff in her despair?"

"I fear that it was so," he answered, with the deepest distress depicted in his haggard face. "She was in a nervous and irritable condition. I had always borne that fact in mind until that moment. She stung me past endurance by her groundless jealousies. I had been a true and loyal husband to her from the hour of our marriage. I had never wronged her by so much as a thought; and yet I could not talk to a pretty peasant-girl, or confess my admiration for any woman I met in society, without causing an outbreak of temper that was almost madness. I bore with her long and patiently. I remembered

that the circumstances of her childhood and youth had been adverse, that her nature had been warped and perverted; I forgave all faults of temper in a wife who loved me; but this afternoon—almost for the first time since our marriage—I spoke unkindly, cruelly perhaps. I have no wish to avoid interrogation, or to conceal any portion of the truth."

"You did not push her over the cliff?"

"I did not. Do I look like a murderer, or bear the character of a man likely to commit murder?"

The examination went on, with cruel reiteration of almost the same questions. The Juge d'Instruction was a hard-headed legal machine, who believed that the truth might be wrung out of any criminal by persistent questioning. He suspected Ransome, or deemed it his duty to suspect him, and he ordered him to be arrested on leaving the court; so George Ransome passed the night after his wife's death in the lock-up at Villefranche.

What a night that was for a man to live through! He sat on a stone bench, listening to the level plish-plash of that tideless sea ever so far beneath him. He heard the footsteps going up and down the steep

stony street of that wonderful old seaport; he heard the scream of the gulls and the striking of the clock on the crest of the hill as he sat motionless, with his elbows on his knees, and his head in his hands, brooding over that swift, sudden horror of yesterday.

Could it have been an accident? Did she step backwards unawares and slip over the edge? No; he remembered where she was standing when he last looked at her, some distance from the side of the cliff, standing among the heather and wild thyme which grew down to the edge of the little path. She must have made a rapid rush to the brink after that fatal speech of his. She had flung her life away in a single impulse of blind, mad anger — or despair. She had not paused for an instant to take thought. Alas! he knew her so well; he had so often seen those sudden gusts of passion; the rush of crimson to the pale small face; the quivering lips striving impotently for speech; the fury in the dark eyes, and the small nervous hands clenched convulsively. He had seen her struggle with the demon of anger, and had seen the storm pass swifter than a tempest-driven cloud across

the moon. Another moment and she would burst into tears, fling her arms round his neck, and implore him to forgive her.

"I love you too well ever to know happiness," she said.

That was her favourite apology.

"It is only people without passions who can be happy," she told him once. "I sometimes think that you belong to that family."

And she was dead; she whose undisciplined love had so plagued and tried him, she was dead; and he felt himself her murderer.

Alas! doubly a murderer, since she had perished just at that time when her life should have been most precious to him, when he should have made any sacrifice to secure her peace. He who had seen all the evils of a fretful temper exhibited in her character had yet been weak enough to yield to a moment of anger, and to insult the woman whom he ought to have cherished.

A long-familiar line of Byron's haunted his brain all through the night, and mixed itself with that sound of footsteps on the street of stairs, and

the scream of the gulls, and the flapping of the waves against the stone quay.

"She died, but not alone—"

She who was to have been the mother of his first-born child was lying dead in the white-walled villa where they had once been happy.

Hush! In the soft clear light of an April morning he heard the tolling of the church bell, solemn, slow, measured, at agonising intervals, which left an age of expectancy between the heavy strokes of the clapper.

Vivos voco, mortuos plango.

They bury their dead at daybreak in that fair land of orange and lemon groves. In the early morning of the first day after death, the hastily-fashioned coffin was carried out into the sunshine, and the funeral procession wound slowly up the hill towards the graveyard near the church of Villefranche. George Ransome knew how brief is the interval between death and burial on that southern shore, and he had little doubt that the bell was tolling for her whose heart was beating passionately when the sun began to sink.

So soon! Her grave would be filled in and trodden down before they let him out of prison.

It had never seemed to him that he was to stay long in captivity, or that there could be any difficulty in proving his innocence of any part in the catastrophe, except that fatal part of having upset the balance of a weak mind, and provoked a passionate woman to suicide. As for the confinement of the past night, he had scarcely thought about it. He had a curious semi-consciousness of time and place which was a new experience to him. He found himself forgetting where he was and what had happened. There were strange gaps in his mind—intervals of oblivion—and then there were periods in which he sat looking at the slanting shaft of sunlight between the window and the ground, and trying to count the motes that danced in that golden haze.

The day passed strangely, too—sometimes at railroad pace, sometimes with a ghastly slowness. Then came a night in which sleep never visited his eyelids—a night of bodily and mental restlessness, the greater part of which he spent in futile efforts to

open the heavily-bolted door, or to drag the window-bars from their stone sockets. His prison was a relic of the Middle Ages, and Hercules himself could not have got out of it.

In all those endeavours he was actuated by a blind impulse—a feverish desire to be at large again. Not once during that night did he think of his dead wife in her new-made grave on the side of the hill. He had forgotten why they had shut him up in that stony chamber—or rather had imagined another reason for his imprisonment.

He was a political offender—had been deeply concerned in a plot to overthrow Victor Emanuel, and to create a Republic for Italy. He himself was to be President of that Republic. He felt all the power to rule and legislate for a great nation. He compared himself with Solon and with Pericles, to the disadvantage of both. There was a greatness in him which neither of those had ever attained.

"I should rule them as God Himself," he thought. "It would be a golden age of truth and justice—a millennium of peace and plenty. And while the

nations are waiting for me I am shut up here by the treachery of France."

Next morning he was [taken before the Juge d'Instruction for the second time. The two fishermen who picked up his wife's corpse were present as witnesses; also his wife's maid, and the three other servants; also his wife's doctor.

He was again questioned severely, but this time nothing could induce him to give a direct answer to any question. He raved about the Italian Republic, of which he was to be chief. He told the French magistrate that France had conspired with the Italian tyrant to imprison and suppress him.

"Every other pretence is a subterfuge," he said. "My popularity in Italy is at the root of this monstrous charge. There will be a rising of the whole nation if you do not instantly release me. For your own sake, sir, I warn you to be prompt."

"This man is pretending to be mad," said the magistrate.

"I fear there is more reality than pretence about the business," said the doctor.

He took Ransome to the window, and looked at

his eyes in the strong white light of noon. Then he went over to the magistrate, and they whispered together for some minutes, while the prisoner sat staring at the floor and muttering to himself.

After that there came a long dark interval in George Ransome's life—a waking dream of intolerable length, but not unalloyed misery; for the hallucinations which made his madness buoyed him up and sustained him during some part of that dark period. He talked with princes and statesmen; he was not alone in the madhouse chamber, or in the madhouse garden, or in that great iron cage where even the most desperate maniacs were allowed to disport themselves in the air and the sunlight as in a gymnasium. He was surrounded by invisible friends and flatterers, by public functionaries who quailed before his glance and were eager to obey his commands. Sometimes he wrote letters and telegrams all day long upon any scraps of paper which his keepers would give him; sometimes he passed whole days in a dreamy silence with arms folded, and abstracted gaze fixed on the distant hill-tops, like

Napoleon at St. Helena, brooding over the future of nations.

By and by there came a period of improvement, or what was called improvement by the doctors, but which to the patient seemed a time of strange blankness and disappointment. All those busy shadows which had peopled his life, his senators and flatterers, had abandoned him; he was alone in that strange place amidst a strange people, most of whom seemed to be somewhat wrong in their heads. He was able to read the newspapers now, and was vexed to find that his speeches were unreported, his letters and manifestoes unpublished; disappointed to find that Victor Emanuel was still King of Italy and the new Republic still a web of dreams.

His temper was very fitful at this time, and he had intervals of violence. One morning he found himself upon the hills, digging with half-a-dozen other men, young and old, dressed pretty much like himself. It was in the early summer morning, before the sun had made the world too hot for labour. It was rapture to him to be there, digging and running about on the dewy hillside, in an amphitheatre of

mountains, high above the stony bed of the Paillon. The air was full of sweet odours, orange and lemon bloom, roses and lilies, from the gardens and orchards below. He felt that earth and sky were rapturously lovely, that life was a blessing and a privilege beyond all words. He had not the consciousness of a single care, or even a troubled memory. His quarrel with his father, his self-imposed exile, his marriage and its bitter disillusions, his wife's tragical fate : all were forgotten. He felt as a sylph might feel—a creature without earthly obligations, revelling in the glory of Nature.

This new phase of being lasted so long as the hills and the sky wore their aspect of novelty. It was succeeded by a period of deepest depression, a melancholy which weighed him down like a leaden burden. He sat in the madhouse garden apart from the rest, brooding over the darkness of life. He had no hopes, no desires.

Gradually memory began to return. He asked why his wife did not come to see him. "She used to be so fond of me," he said, "foolishly fond of me ; and now she deserts me."

Then he talked of going home again. The image of his latest dwelling-place had gradually shaped itself in his mind. He saw the hedges of pale amber roses, the carouba-trees, dark against the glittering blue of the sea, which shone through every opening in the branches like a background of lapis lazuli, and the rugged mountains rising above the low curving shore steeply towards the sky, with patches of olive here and there on their stony flanks, but for the most part bare and barren, reddish-yellow, steeped in sunlight.

Yes, he remembered every feature of that lovely and varied scene. The village of Eza yonder on the mountain-road—a cluster of stony dwellings perched upon rocky foundations, hardly to be distinguished from the rough crags upon which they were built—and higher still, in a cleft of those yellow hills, Turbia, and its cloven towers, the birthplace of Roman Emperors. How lovely it all was, and how pleasant it had been to lounge in his garden, where the light looked dazzling on beds of white gilly-flowers, and where the blue summer sea smiled in

the far distance, with a faint purple cloud yonder on the horizon which represented Corsica!

Why had he ever left that familiar home? Why could he not return to it?

"Get me a carriage," he said to one of the attendants; "I want to go home immediately. My wife is waiting for me."

It is not customary to make explanations to patients even in the best-regulated asylums. Nobody answered him; nobody explained anything to him. He found himself confronted with a dogged silence. He wore himself out in an agony of impatience, like a bird beating itself to death against its bars. He languished in a miserable ignorance, piecing his past life together bit by bit, with a strange interweaving of fancies and realities, until by slow degrees the fancies dropped out of the web and left him face to face with the truth.

At last the record of the past was complete. He knew that his wife was dead, and remembered how she had died. He knew that he had been a prisoner, first in gaol and then in a lunatic asylum; but he did not acknowledge to himself that he had been

mad. He remembered the bell tolling in the saffron light of dawn; he remembered the magistrate's exasperating questions; he remembered everything.

After this he sank into a state of sullen despair, and silence and apathy were accepted as the indications of cure. He was told by the head physician that he could leave the institution whenever he pleased. There was an account against him as a private patient, which had been guaranteed by his landlord, who knew him to be a man of some means. His German man-servant had been to the asylum many times to inquire about him. The doctor recommended him to travel—in Switzerland—until the end of the autumn, and to take his servant as his attendant and courier. "Change of air and scene will be of inestimable advantage to you," said the doctor; "but it would not be wise for you to travel alone."

"What month is it?"

"August—the twenty-second."

"And my wife died early in April," he said.

"Only a few months; and I feel as if I had been in this place a century."

He took the doctor's advice. He cared very little where he went or what became of him. Life and the world, his own individuality, and the beautiful earth around and about him were alike indifferent to him. He went back to the villa at St. Jean, and to the garden he had loved so well in the bright fresh spring-time. All things had an overgrown and neglected look in the ripeness of expiring summer; too many flowers, a rank luxuriance of large leaves and vivid blossoms—fruit rotting in the long grass—an odour of decaying oranges, the waste of the last harvest. He went up to the graveyard on the hill above the harbour. It was not a picturesque burial-place. The cemetery at Cimies was far more beautiful. The cemetery at Nice was in a grander position.

He felt sorry that she should lie here, amidst the graves of sailors and fishermen—as even if after death she were slighted and hardly used.

He was summoned back to England early in the following year to his mother's death-bed. Neither

she nor any of his family had known the miserable end of his married life. They knew only that he had married, and had lost his wife after a year of marriage. Hazard had not brought any one belonging to him in contact with any of those few people who knew the details of that tragical story.

His mother's death made him rich and independent, but until the hour he met Mildred Fausset his life was a blank.

CHAPTER V.

THE GRAVE ON THE HILL.

After that visit to the great white barrack on the road to St. André, Mildred felt that her business at Nice was finished, there was nothing more for her to learn. She knew all the sad story now—all, except those lights and shadows of the picture which only the unhappy actor in that domestic tragedy could have told her. The mystery of the past had unfolded itself, stage by stage, from that Sunday afternoon when César Castellani came to Enderby Manor, and out of trivial-seeming talk launched a thunderbolt. The curtain was lifted. There was no more to be done. And yet Mildred lingered at Nice, loving the place and its environs a little for their own beauty, and feeling a strange and sorrowful interest in the scene of her husband's misfortunes.

There was another reason for remaining in the

gay white city in the fact that Lady Lochinvar had taken a fancy to Miss Ransome, and that the young lady seemed to be achieving a remarkably rapid cure of her infatuation for the Italian. It may have been because at the Palais Montano she met a good many Italians, and that the charm of that nationality became less potent with familiarity. There was music, too, at the Palais, and to spare, according to Mr. Stuart, who was not an enthusiast, and was wont to shirk his aunt's musical reunions.

Mildred was delighted to see her husband's niece entering society under such agreeable auspices. She went out with her occasionally, just enough to make people understand that she was not indifferent to her niece's happiness; and for the rest, Lady Lochinvar and Mrs. Murray were always ready to chaperon the frank, bright girl, who was much admired by the best people, and was never at a loss for partners at dances, whoever else might play wallflower.

Mrs. Greswold invited Mr. and Mrs. Murray and Malcolm Stuart to a quiet little dinner at the Westminster, and the impression the young man made upon Mildred's mind was altogether favourable. He

was certainly not handsome, but his plainness was of an honest Scottish type, and his freckled complexion and blue eyes, sandy hair and moustache, were altogether different from the traditionary Judas colouring of Castellani's auburn beard and hazel eyes. Truth and honesty beamed in the Scotchman's open countenance. He looked every inch a soldier and a gentleman.

That he admired Pamela was obvious to the most unobservant eye; that she affected to look down upon him was equally obvious; but it might be that her good-humoured scorn of him was more pretence than reality. She made light of him openly as one of that inferior race of men whose minds never soar above the stable, the gunroom, or the home-farm, and whose utmost intellectual ingenuity culminates in the invention of a salmon-fly or the discovery of a new fertiliser for turnip-fields.

"You are just like my brother-in-law, Henry Mountford," she told him.

"From the air with which you say that, I conclude Sir Henry Mountford must be a very inferior person."

"Not at all. He is the kind of man whom all other men seem to respect. I believe he is one of the best shots in England. His bags are written about in the newspapers; and I wonder there are any pigeons left in the world, considering the way he has slaughtered them."

"I saw him shoot at Monte Carlo the year before last."

"Yes; he went there and back in a week on purpose to shoot. Imagine any man coming to this divine Riviera, this land of lemon-groves and palms, and roses and violets, just to slaughter pigeons!"

"He won the Grand Prix. It was a pretty big feather in his cap," said Mr. Stuart. "Am I to conclude that you dislike sporting men?"

"I prefer men who cultivate their minds."

"Ah, but a man who shoots well and rides straight, and can play a big salmon, and knows how to manage a farm, cannot be altogether an imbecile. I never knew a really fine rider yet who was a fool. Good horsemanship needs so many qualities that fools don't possess; and to be a crack shot, I assure

you that a man must have some brains and a good deal of perseverance; and perseverance is not a bad thing in its way, Miss Ransome."

He looked at her with a certain significance in his frank blue eyes, looked at her resolutely, as some bold young Vandal or Visigoth might have looked at a Roman maiden whom he meant to subjugate.

"I did not say that sportsmen were fools," she answered sharply. "I only say that the kind of man I respect is the man whose pleasures are those of the intellect—who is in the front rank among the thinkers of his age—who—"

"Reads Darwin and the German metaphysicians, I suppose. I tried Darwin to see if he would help me in my farming, but I can't say I got very much out of him in that line. There's more in old Virgil for an agriculturist. I'm not a reading man, you see, Miss Ransome. I find by the time I've read the daily papers my thirst for knowledge is pretty well satisfied. There's such a lot of information in the London papers, and when you add the *Figaro* and the *New York Herald*, there's not much

left for a man to learn. I generally read the Quarterlies—as a duty—to discover how many dull books have enriched the world during the previous three months."

"That's a great deal more reading than my brother-in-law gets through. He makes a great fuss about his *Times* every morning; but I believe he seldom goes beyond the births, marriages, and deaths, or a report of a billiard match. He reads the *Field*, as a kind of religion, and *Baily's Magazine;* and I think that's all."

"Do you like men who write books, Miss Ransome, as well as men who read them?"

Pamela crimsoned to the roots of her hair at this most innocent question. Malcolm Stuart marked that blush with much perplexity.

"When one is interested in a book one likes to know the author," she replied, with cautious vagueness.

"Do you know many writers?"

"Not many—in fact, only one."

"Who is he?"

"Mr. Castellani, the author of *Nepenthe*."

"*Nepenthe*?—ah, that's a novel people were talking about some time ago. My aunt was full of it, because she fancied it embodied some of her own ideas. She wanted me to read it. I tried a few chapters," said Malcolm, making a wry face. "Sickly stuff."

"People who are not in the habit of reading the literature of imagination can hardly understand such a book as *Nepenthe*," replied Pamela severely. "They are out of touch with the spirit and the atmosphere of the book."

"One has to be trained up to that kind of thing, I suppose. One must forget that two and two make four, in order to get into the proper frame of mind, eh? Is the author of *Nepenthe* an interesting man?"

He was shrewd enough to interpret the blush aright. The author of *Nepenthe* was a person to be dreaded by any aspirant to Miss Ransome's favour.

"He is like his book," answered Pamela briefly.

"Is he a young man?"

"I don't know your idea of youth. He is older than my aunt—about five-and-thirty."

Stuart was just thirty. One point in his favour, anyhow, he told himself, not knowing that to a romantic girl years may be interesting.

"Handsome?"

"*That* is always a matter of opinion. He is just the kind of man who ought to have written *Nepenthe*. That is really all I can tell you," said Pamela, with some irritation. "I believe Lady Lochinvar knew Mr. Castellani when he was a very young man. She can satisfy your curiosity about him."

"I am not curious. Castellani? An Italian, I suppose, one of my aunt's innumerable geniuses. She has a genius for discovering geniuses. When I see her with a new one, I am always reminded of a child with a little coloured balloon. So pretty —till it bursts!"

Pamela turned her back upon him in a rage, and went over to the piano to talk to Mrs. Murray, who was preparing to sing one of her *répertoire* of five Scotch ballads.

"Shall it be 'Gin a body' or 'Huntingtower'?" she asked meekly; and nobody volunteering a decisive opinion, she chirruped the former coquettish little

ballad, and put a stop to social intercourse for exactly four minutes and a half.

After that evening Mr. Stuart knew who his rival was, and with what kind of influence he had to contend. An author, a musical man, a genius! Well, he had very few weapons with which to fight such an antagonist, he who was neither musical, nor literary, nor gifted with any of the graces which recommend a lover to a sentimental girl. But he was a man, and he meant to win her. He admired her for her frank young prettiness, so unsophisticated and girlish, and for that perfect freshness and truthfulness of mind which made all her thoughts transparent. He was too much a man of the world to ignore the fact that Miss Ransome of Mapledown would be a very good match for him, or that such a marriage would strengthen his position in his aunt's esteem. Women bow down to success. Encouraged by these considerations, Mr. Stuart pursued the even tenor of his way, and was not disheartened by the idea of the author of *Nepenthe*, more especially as that attractive personage was not on the ground.

He had one accomplishment over and above the usual outdoor exercises of a country gentleman. He could dance, and he was Pamela's favourite partner wherever she went. No one else waltzed as well. Not even the most gifted of her German acquaintance ; not even the noble Spaniards who were presented to her.

He had another and still greater advantage in the fact that he was often in the young lady's society. She was fond of Lady Lochinvar, and spent a good deal of her life at the Palais Montano, where, with Mrs. Murray's indefatigable assistance, there were tennis-parties twice a week. That charming garden, with its numerous summer-houses, made a kind of club for the privileged few who were permitted *les petites entrées*.

While Pamela was enjoying the lovely springtide amongst people whose only thought was of making the best of life, and getting the maximum of sunshine, Mildred Greswold spent her days in sad musings upon an irrevocable past. It was her melancholy pleasure to revisit again and again the

place in which her husband had lived, the picturesque little village under the shadow of the tall cliff, every pathway which he must have trodden, every point from which he must have gazed across the bay, seaward or landward in his troubled reveries.

She dwelt with morbid persistence on the thought of those two lives, both dear to her, yet in their union how terrible a curse! She revisited the villa until the old caretaker grew to look upon her as a heaven-sent benefactress, and until the village children christened her the English Madonna, that pensive look recalling the face of the statue in the church yonder, so mildly sad, a look of ineffable sweetness tinged with pain. She sat for hours at a stretch in the sunlit garden, amongst such flowers as must have been blooming there in those closing hours of Fay's wedded life, when the shadow of her cruel fate was darkening round her, though she knew it not. She talked to people who had known the English lady. Alas! they were all dubious in their opinions. None would answer boldly for the husband's innocence. They shrugged their

shoulders—they shook their heads. Who could say? Only the good God would ever know the truth about that story.

The place to which she went oftenest in those balmy afternoons was the burial-ground on the hill, where Fay's grave, with its white marble cross, occupied one of the highest points in the enclosure, and stood out sharp and clear against the cloudless sapphire.

The inscription on that marble was of the briefest:

"Vivien Ransome.
Died April 24th, 1868.
Eternally lamented."

Below the cross stretched the grass mound, without shrub or flower. It was Mildred's task to beautify this neglected grave. She brought a florist from the neighbourhood to carry out her own idea, and on her instruction he removed the long, rank grass from the mound, and planted a cross of roses, eight feet long, dwarf bush-roses closely planted, Gloire de Dijon and Maréchal Niel.

She remembered how Fay had revelled in the rose-garden at The Hook, where midsummer was a

kind of carnival of roses. Here the roses would bloom all the year round, and there would be perpetual perfume and blossom and colour above poor Fay's cold dust.

CHAPTER VI.

PAMELA CHANGES HER MIND.

Lucifer himself, after his fall, could not have felt worse than César Castellani when he followed Mildred Greswold to Nice, as he did within a week after she left Pallanza.

He went to Nice partly because he was an idle man, and had no desire to go back to English east winds just when the glory of the southern springtide was beginning. He was tolerably well furnished with money, and Nice was as good to him as any other place, while the neighbourhood of Monte Carlo was always an attraction. He followed in Mildred's footsteps, therefore; but he had no idea of forcing himself upon her presence for some time to come. He knew that his chances were ruined in that quarter for the time being, if not for ever.

This was his first signal overthrow. Easy conquests had so demoralised him that he had

grown to consider all conquests easy. He had unlimited faith in the charm of his own personality—his magnetic power, as he called it: and, behold! his magnetic power had failed utterly with this lovely, lonely woman, who should have turned to him in her desolation as the flowers turn to the sun.

For once in his life he had overrated himself and his influence; and in so doing he had lost the chance of a very respectable alliance.

"Fifteen hundred a year would be at least bread and cheese," he reflected, "and to marry an English heiress of a good old family would solidify my position in society. The girl is pretty enough, and I could twist her round my finger. She would bore me frightfully; but every man must suffer something. There is always a discord somewhere amidst the harmony of life; and if one's teeth are not too often set on edge by that false note, one should be content."

He remembered how contemptuously he had rejected the idea of such a marriage in his talk with Miss Fausset, and how she had been set upon it.

"I should stand ever so much better with her if I married well, and solidified myself into British

respectability. I might naturalise myself, and go into Parliament perhaps, if that would please the good soul at Brighton. What will she leave me when she dies, I wonder? She is muter than the Sphinx upon that point. And will she ever die? Brighton is famous for pauper females of ninety and upwards. A woman like Miss Fausset, who lives in cotton-wool, and who has long done with the cares and passions of life, might go well into a second century. I don't see any brilliancy in the prospect *there;* but so long as I please her and do well in the world she will no doubt be generous."

He told himself that it was essential he should make some concession to Miss Fausset's prejudices now that he had failed with Mildred. So long as he had hoped to win that nobler prize he had been careless how he jeopardised the favour of his elderly patroness. But now he felt that her favour was all in all to him, and that the time for trifling was past.

She had been very generous to him during the years that had gone by since she first came to his aid almost unasked, and helped him to pay his college debts. She had come to the rescue many times

since that juvenile entanglement, and her patience had been great. Yet she had not failed to remonstrate with him at every fresh instance of folly and self-indulgent extravagance. She had talked to him with an unflinching directness; she had refused further help; but somehow she had always given way, and the cheque had been written.

Again and again she had warned him that there were limits even to her forbearance.

"If I saw you working earnestly and industriously, I should not mind, even if you were a failure," said his benefactress severely.

"I have worked, and I have produced a book which was *not* a failure," replied César, with his silkiest air.

"One book in a decade of so-called literary life! Did the success of that book result in the payment of one single debt?"

"Dearest lady, would you have a man waste his own earnings—the first-fruits of his pen—the grains of fairy gold that filtered through the mystic web of his fancy—would you have him fritter away that sacred product upon importunate hosiers or vindic-

tive bootmakers? *That* money was altogether precious to me. I kept it in my waistcoat pocket as long as ever I could. The very touch of the coin thrilled me. I believe cabmen and crossing-sweepers had most of it in the long-run," he concluded, with a remorseful sigh.

Miss Fausset had borne with his idleness and his vanity, as indulgent mothers bear with their sons; but he felt that she was beginning to tire of him. There were reasons why she should always continue forbearing; but he wanted to insure himself something better than reluctant subsidies.

These considerations being taken into account, Mr. Castellani was fain to own to himself that he had been a fool in rejecting the substance for the shadow, however alluring the lovely shade might be.

"But I loved her," he sighed; "I loved her as I had never loved until I saw her fair Madonna face amidst the century-old peace of her home. She filled my life with a new element. She purified and exalted my whole being. And she is thrice as rich as that prattling girl!"

He ground his teeth at the remembrance of his

failure. There had been no room for doubt. Those soft violet eyes had been transformed by indignation, and had flashed upon him with angry fire. That fair Madonna face had whitened to marble with suppressed passion. Not by one glance, not by one tremor in the contemptuous voice, had the woman he loved acknowledged his influence.

He put up at the Cosmopolitan, got in half-a-dozen French novels of the most advanced school from Galignani's Library, and kept himself very close for a week or two; but he contrived to find out what the ladies at the Westminster were doing through Albrecht the courier, who believed him to be Miss Ransome's suitor, and was inclined to be communicative, after being copiously treated to bocks, or *petits verres*, as the case might be.

From Albrecht, Castellani heard how Miss Ransome spent most of her time at the Palais Montano, or gadding about with her ladyship and Mrs. Murray; how, in Albrecht's private opinion, the balls and other dissipations of Nice were turning that young lady's head; how Mrs. Greswold went for lonely drives day after day, and would not allow Albrecht to

show her the beauties of the neighbourhood, which it would have been alike his duty and pleasure to have done. He had ascertained that her favourite, and, indeed, habitual, drive was to St. Jean, where she was in the habit of leaving the fly at the little inn while she strolled about the village in a purposeless manner. All this appeared to Albrecht as eccentric and absurd, and beneath a lady of Mrs. Greswold's position. She would have employed her time to more advantage in going on distant excursions in a carriage and pair, and in lunching at remote hotels, where Albrecht would have been sure of a *bonne main* from a gratified landlord, as well as his commission from the livery-stable.

Castellani heard with displeasure of Pamela's dancings and junketings, and he told himself that it was time to throw himself across her pathway. He had not been prepared to find that she could enjoy life without him. Her admiration of him had been so transparent, her sentimental fancy so naïvely revealed, that he had believed himself the sultan of her heart, having only to throw the handkerchief whenever it might suit him to claim his prey. Much

as he prided himself upon his knowledge of human nature, as exemplified in the softer sex, he had never estimated the fickleness of a shallow sentimental character like Pamela's. No man with a due regard to the value and dignity of his sex could conceive the ruthless rapidity with which a young lady of this temperament will transfer her affections and her large assortment of day-dreams and romantic fancies from one man to another. No man could conceive her capacity for admiring in Number Two all those qualities which were lacking in Number One. No man could imagine the exquisite adaptability of girlhood to surrounding circumstances.

Had Castellani taken Miss Ransome when she was in the humour, he would have found her the most amiable and yielding of wives; a model English wife, ready to adapt herself in all things to the will and the pleasure of her husband; unselfish, devoted, unassailable in her belief in her husband as the first and best of men. But he had not seized his opportunity. He had allowed nearly a month to go by since his defeat at Pallanza, and he had allowed

Pamela to discover that life might be endurable, nay, even pleasant, without him.

And now, hearing that the young lady was gadding about, and divining that such gadding was the high-road to forgetfulness, Mr. Castellani made up his mind to resume his sway over Miss Ransome's fancy without loss of time. He called upon a dashing American matron whom he had visited in London and Paris, and who was now the occupant of a villa on the Promenade des Anglais, and in her drawing-room he fell in with several of his London acquaintances. He found, however, that his American friend, Mrs. Montagu W. Brown, had not yet succeeded in being invited to the Palais Montano, and only knew Lady Lochinvar and Miss Ransome by sight.

"Her ladyship is too stand-offish for my taste," said Mrs. Montagu Brown, "but the girl seems friendly enough — no style — not as we Americans understand style. I am told she ranks as an heiress on this side, but at the last ball at the Cercle she wore a frock that I should call dear at forty dollars. That young Stuart is after her, evidently. I hope you are going to the dance next Tuesday, Mr.

Castellani? I want some one nice to talk to now my waltzing days are over."

Castellani protested that Mrs. Montagu Brown was in the very heyday of a dancer's age, and would be guilty of gross cruelty to terpsichorean society in abandoning that delightful art.

"You make me tired," said Mrs. Montagu Brown, with perfect good-humour. "There are plenty of women who don't know when they're old, but I calculate every woman knows when she weighs a hundred and sixty pounds. When my waist came to twenty-six inches I knew it was time to leave off waltzing; and I was pretty good at it, too, in my day, I can tell you."

"With that carriage you must have been divine," replied César; "and I believe the cestus of the Venus de Milo must measure over twenty-six inches."

"The Venus de Milo has no more figure than the peasant-women one sees on the promenade, women who seem as if they set their faces against the very idea of a waist. Be sure you get a card for Tuesday. I hate a dude; but I love to have some smart men about me wherever I go."

"I shall be there," said Castellani, bending over his hostess and imparting a confidential pressure to her fat white hand by way of leave-taking, before he slipped silently from the room.

He had studied the art of departure as if it were a science: never lingered, never hummed and hawed; never said he must go and didn't; never apologised for going so soon while everybody was pining to get rid of him.

The next day there was a battle of flowers; not the great floral fête before the sugar-plum carnival, but an altogether secondary affair, pleasant enough in the balmy weather of advancing spring.

Every one of any importance was on the promenade, and among the best carriages appeared Lady Lochinvar's barouche, decorated with white camellias and carmine carnations. She had carefully eschewed that favourite mixture of camellias and Parma violets which has always a half-mourning or funereal air. Malcolm Stuart and Miss Ransome sat side by side on the front seat with a great basket of carnations on their knees, with which they pelted their acquaintance, while Lady Lochinvar, in brown

velvet and ostrich plumage, reposed at her ease in the back of the spacious carriage, and enjoyed the fun without any active participation.

It was Pamela's first experience in flower-fights, and to her the scene seemed enchanting. The afternoon was peerless. She wore a white gown, as if it had been midsummer, and white gowns were the rule in most of the carriages. The sea was at its bluest, the pink walls and green shutters, white walls and red roofs, the orange-trees, cactus and palm, made up a picture of a city in fairyland, taken as a background to a triple procession of carriages all smothered in Parma violets, Dijon roses, camellias, and narcissus, with here and there some picturesque coach festooned with oranges and lemons amidst tropical foliage.

The carriages moved at a foot-pace; the pavements were crowded with smart people, who joined in the contest. Pamela's lap was full of bouquets, which fell from her in showers as she stood up every now and then to fling a handful of carnations into a passing carriage.

Presently, while she was standing thus, flushed

and sparkling, she saw a familiar figure on the foot-path by the sea, and paled suddenly at the sight.

It was César Castellani, sauntering slowly along, in a short coat of light-coloured cloth, and a felt hat of exactly the same delicate shade. He came to the carriage-door. There was a block at the moment, and he had time to talk to the occupants.

"How do you do, Lady Lochinvar? You have not forgotten me, I hope—César Castellani—though it is such ages since we met?"

He only lifted his hat to Lady Lochinvar, waiting for her recognition, but he held out his hand to Pamela.

"How do you like Nice, Miss Ransome? As well as Pallanza, I hope?"

"Ever so much better than Pallanza."

There was a time when that coat and hat, the *soupçon* of dark blue velvet waistcoat just showing underneath the pale buff collar, the loose China silk handkerchief carelessly fastened with a priceless intaglio, the gardenia and pearl-gray gloves, would have ensnared Pamela's fancy: but that time was past. She thought that César's costume looked

effeminate and underbred beside the stern simplicity of Mr. Stuart's heather-mixture *complet*. The scales had fallen from her eyes; and she recognised the bad taste and the vanity involved in that studied carelessness, that artistic combination of colour.

She remembered what Mildred had said of Mr. Castellani, and she was deliberately cold. Lady Lochinvar was gracious, knowing nothing to the Italian's discredit.

"I remember you perfectly," she said. "You have changed very little in all these years. Be sure you come and see me. I am at home at five almost every afternoon."

The carriage moved on, and Pamela sat in an idle reverie for the next ten minutes, although the basket of carnations was only half empty.

She was thinking how strange it was that her heart beat no faster. Could it be that she was cured—and so soon? It was even worse than a cure; it was a positive revulsion of feeling. She was vexed with herself for ever having exalted that over-dressed foreigner into a hero. She felt she had been un-English, unwomanly even, in her exagger-

ated admiration of an exotic. And then she glanced at Malcolm Stuart, and averted her eyes with a conscious blush on seeing him earnestly observant of her.

He was plain, certainly. His features had been moulded roughly, but they were not bad features. The lines were rather good, in fact, and it was a fine manly countenance. He was fair and slightly freckled, as became a Scotchman; his eyes were clear and blue, but could be compared to neither sapphires nor violets, and his eyelashes were lighter than any cultivated young lady could approve. The general tone of his hair and complexion was ginger; and ginger, taken in connection with masculine beauty, is not all one would wish. But then ginger is not uncommon in the service, and it is a hue which harmonises agreeably with Highland bonnets and tartan. No doubt Mr. Stuart had looked really nice in his uniform. He had certainly appeared to advantage in a Highland costume at the fancy ball the other night. Some people had pronounced him the finest-looking man in the room.

And, again, good looks are of little importance

in a man. A plainish man, possessed of all the manly accomplishments, a dead shot and a crack rider, can always appear to advantage in English society. Pamela was beginning to think more kindly of sporting men, and even of Sir Henry Mountford.

"I'm sure Mr. Stuart would get on with him," she thought, dimly foreseeing a day when Sir Henry and her new acquaintance would be brought together somehow.

César Castellani took immediate advantage of Lady Lochinvar's invitation. He presented himself at the Palais Montano on the following afternoon, and he found Pamela established there as if she belonged to the house. It was she who poured out the tea, and dispensed those airy little hot cakes, which were a kind of idealised galette, served in the daintiest of doyleys, embroidered with Lady Lochinvar's cipher and coronet.

Mr. and Mrs. Murray were there, and Malcolm Stuart, the chief charm of whose society seemed to consist in his exhibition of an accomplished Dandie Dinmont which usurped the conversation, and which

Castellani would have liked to inoculate then and there with the most virulent form of rabies. Pamela squatted on a little stool at the creature's feet, and assisted in showing him off. She had acquired a power over him which indicated an acquaintance of some standing.

"What fools girls are!" thought Castellani.

His conquests among women of maturer years had been built upon rock as compared with the shifting quicksand of a girl's fancy. He began to think the genus girl utterly contemptible.

"He has but one fault," said Pamela, when the terrier had gone through various clumsy evolutions in which the bandiness of his legs and the length of his body had been shown off to the uttermost. "He cannot endure Box, and Box detests him. They never meet without trying to murder each other, and I'm very much afraid," bending down to kiss the broad hairy head, "that Dandie is the stronger."

"Of course he is. Box is splendid for muscle, but weight must tell in the long-run," replied Mr. Stuart.

"My grandmother had a Dandie whose father belonged to Sir Walter Scott," began Mrs. Murray: "he was simply a per-r-r-fect dog, and my mamma—"

Castellani fled from this inanity. He went to the other end of the room, where Lady Lochinvar was listening listlessly to Mr. Murray, laid himself out to amuse her ladyship for the next ten minutes, and then departed without so much as a look at Pamela.

"The spell is broken," he said to himself, as he drove away. "The girl is next door to an idiot. No doubt she will marry that sandy Scotchman. Lady Lochinvar means it, and a silly-pated miss like that can be led with a thread of floss silk. *Moi je m'en fiche.*"

About a week after Mr. Castellani's reappearance Mildred Greswold received a letter from Brighton, which made a sudden change in her plans.

It was from Mr. Maltravers the Incumbent of St. Edmund's:

"St. Edmund's Vicarage.

"Dear Mrs. Greswold,—After our thoroughly confidential conversations last autumn I feel justified in addressing you upon a subject which I know is very near to your heart, namely, the health and welfare, spiritual as well as bodily, of your dear aunt and my most valued parishioner, Miss Fausset. The condition of that dear lady has given me considerable uneasiness during the last few months. She has refused to take her hand from the plough; she labours as faithfully as ever in the Lord's vineyard; but I see with deepest regret that she is no longer the woman she was, even a year ago. The decay has been sudden, and it has been rapid. Her strength begins to fail her, though she will hardly admit as much, even to her medical attendant, and her spirits are less equable than of old. She has intervals of extreme depression, against which the efforts of friendship, the power of spiritual consolation, are unavailing.

"I feel it my duty to inform you, as one who has a right to be interested in the disposal of Miss Fausset's wealth, that my benfactress has con-

summated the generosity of past years by a magnificent gift. She has endowed her beloved Church of St. Edmund with an income which, taken in conjunction with the pew-rents, an institution which I hope hereafter to abolish, raises the priest of the temple from penury to comfort, and affords him the means of helping the poor of his parish with his alms as well as with his prayers and ministrations. This munificent gift closes the long account of beneficence betwixt your dear aunt and me. I have nothing further to expect from her for my church or for myself. It is fully understood between us that this gift is final. You will understand, therefore, that I am disinterested in my anxiety for this precious life.

"You, dear Mrs. Greswold, are your aunt's only near relative, and it is but right you should be the companion and comforter of her declining days. That the shadow of the grave is upon her I can but fear, although medical science sees but slight cause for alarm. A year ago she was a vigorous woman, spare of habit certainly, but with a hardness of bearing and manner which promised a long life. To-day

she is a broken woman, nervous, fitful, and, I fear, unhappy, though I can conceive no cause for sadness in the closing years of such a noble life as hers has been, unselfish, devoted to good works and exalted thoughts. If you can find it compatible with your other ties to come to Brighton, I would strongly recommend you to come without loss of time, and I believe that the change which you will yourself perceive in my valued friend will fully justify the course I take in thus addressing you.—I am ever, dear Mrs. Greswold, your friend and servant,

"Samuel Maltravers."

Mildred gave immediate orders to courier and maid, her trunks were to be packed that afternoon, a *coupé* was to be taken in the Rapide for the following day, and the travellers were to go straight through to Paris. But when she announced this fact to Pamela the damsel's countenance expressed utmost despondency.

"Upon my word, aunt, you have a 'genius for taking one away from a place just when one is beginning to be happy!" she exclaimed in irrepressible vexation.

She apologised directly after upon hearing of Miss Fausset's illness.

"I am a horrid ill-tempered creature," she said; "but I really am beginning to adore Nice. It is a place that grows upon one."

"What if I were to leave you with Lady Lochinvar? She told me the other day that she would like very much to have you to stay with her. You might stay till she leaves Nice, which will be in about three weeks' time, and you could travel with her to Paris. You could go from Paris to Brighton very comfortably, with Peterson to take care of you. Perhaps you would not mind leaving Nice when Lady Lochinvar goes?"

Pamela sparkled and blushed at the suggestion.

"I should like it very much, if Lady Lochinvar is in earnest in asking to have me."

"I am sure she is in earnest. There is only one stipulation I must make, Pamela. You must promise me not to renew your intimacy with Mr. Castellani."

"With all my heart, aunt. My eyes have been opened. He is thoroughly bad style."

CHAPTER VII.

AS THE SANDS RUN DOWN.

Mildred was in Brighton upon the third day after she left Nice. She had sent no intimation of her coming to her aunt, lest her visit should be forbidden. A nervous invalid is apt to have fancies, and to resent anything that looks like being taken care of. She arrived, therefore, unannounced, left her luggage at the station, and drove straight to Lewes Crescent, where the butler received her with every appearance of surprise.

It was early in the afternoon, and Miss Fausset was sitting in her accustomed chair in the back drawing-room, near the fire, with her book-table on her right hand. The balmy spring-time which Mildred had left at Nice had not yet visited Brighton, where the season had been exceptionally cold, and where a jovial north-easter was holding his revels all over Kemp Town, and enlivening the cold gray sea. A pleasant bracing day for robust health and animal

spirits; but not altogether the kind of atmosphere to suit an elderly spinster suffering from nervous depression.

Miss Fausset started up, flushed with surprise, at Mildred's entrance. Her niece had kept her acquainted with her movements, but had told her nothing of the drama of her existence since she left Brighton.

"My dear child, I am very glad to see you back," she said gently. "You are come to stay with me for a little while, I hope, before—"

She hesitated, and looked at Mildred earnestly.

"Are you reconciled to your husband?" she asked abruptly, as if with irrepressible anxiety.

"Reconciled?" echoed Mildred; "we have never quarrelled. He is as dear to me to-day as he was the day I married him—dearer for all the years we spent together. But we are parted for ever. You know that it must be so, and you know why."

"I hoped that time would have taught you common sense."

"Time has only confirmed my resolution. Do not let us argue the point, aunt. I know that you

mean kindly, but I know that you are false to your own principles—to all the teaching of your life—when you argue on the side of wrong."

Miss Fausset turned her head aside impatiently. She had sunk back into her chair after greeting Mildred, and her niece perceived that she, who used to sit erect as a dart, in the most uncompromising attitude, was now propped up with cushions, against which her wasted figure leaned heavily.

"How have you got through the winter, aunt?" Mildred asked presently.

"Not very well. It has tried me more than any other winter I can remember. It has been a long weary winter. I have been obliged to give up the greater part of my district work. I held on as long as ever I could, till my strength failed me. And now I have to trust the work to others. I have my lieutenants—Emily Newton and her sister—who work for me. You remember them, perhaps. Earnest good girls. They keep me *en rapport* with my poor people; but it is not like personal intercourse. I begin to feel what it is to be useless—to cumber the ground."

"My dear aunt, how can you talk so? Your life has been so full of usefulness that you may well afford to take rest now that your health is not quite so good as it has been. Even in your drawing-room here you are doing good. It is only right that young people should carry out your instructions, and work for you. I have heard, too, of your munificent gift to St. Edmund's."

"It is nothing, my dear. When all is counted, it is nothing. I have tried to lead a righteous life. I have tried to do good; but now sitting alone by this fire day after day, night after night, it all seems vain and empty. There is no comfort in the thought of it all, Mildred. I have had the praise of men, but never the approval of my own conscience."

There was a brief silence, Mildred feeling it vain to argue against her aunt's tone of self-upbraiding, unable to fathom the mind which prompted the words.

"Then you are not going back to your husband?" Miss Fausset asked abruptly, as if in utter forgetfulness of all that had been said; and then suddenly recollecting herself, "you have made up

your mind, you say. Well, in that case you can stay with me—make this your home. You may take up my work, perhaps—by and by."

"Yes, aunt, I hope I may be able to do so. My life has been idle and useless since my great sorrow. I want to learn to be of more use in the world; and you can teach me, if you will."

"I will, Mildred. I want you to be happy. I have made my will. You will inherit the greater part of my fortune."

"My dear aunt, I don't want—"

"No, you are rich enough already, I know; but I should like you to have still larger means, to profit by my death. You will use your wealth for the good of others, as I have tried—feebly tried—to use mine. You will be rich enough to found a sisterhood, if you like—the Sisters of St. Edmund. I have done all I mean to do for the Church. Mr. Maltravers knows that."

"Dear aunt, why should we talk of these things? You have many years of life before you, I hope."

"No, Mildred, the end is not far off. I feel worn out and broken. I am a doomed woman."

"But you have had no serious illness since I was here?"

"No, no, nothing specific; only languor and shattered nerves, want of appetite, want of sleep: the sure indications of decay. My doctor can find no name for my malady. He tries one remedy after another, until I weary of his experiments. I am glad you have come to me, Mildred; but I should be gladder if you were going back to your husband."

"O, aunt, why do you say things which you know must torture me?"

"Because I am worried by your folly. Well, I will say no more. You will stay with me and comfort me, if you can. What have you done with Pamela?"

Mildred told her aunt about Lady Lochinvar's invitation.

"Ah! she is with Lady Lochinvar. A very frivolous person, I suppose. Your husband's niece is a well-meaning silly girl; sure to get into mischief of some kind. Is she still in love with César Castellani?"

"I think not—I hope not. I believe she is cured of that folly."

"You call it a folly? Well, perhaps you are right. It may be foolishness for a girl to follow the blind instinct of her heart."

"For an impulsive girl like Pamela."

"Yes, no doubt she is impulsive, generous, and uncalculating; a girl hardly to be trusted with her own fate," said Miss Fausset, with a sigh, and then she lapsed into silence.

Mr. Maltravers had not exaggerated the change in her. It was only too painfully evident. Her manner and bearing had altered since Mildred had seen her last. Physically and mentally her nature seemed to have relaxed and broken down. It was as if the springs that sustained the human machine had snapped. The whole mechanism was out of gear. She who had been so firm of speech and meaning, who had been wont to express herself with a cold and cutting decisiveness, was now feeble and wailing, repeating herself, harping upon the same old string, obviously forgetful of that which had gone before.

Mildred felt that she would be only doing her duty in taking up her abode in the great dull house, and trying to soothe the tedium of decay. She could do very little, perhaps, but the fact of near kindred would be in itself a solace, and for her own part she would have the sense of duty done.

"I will stay with you as long as you will have me, aunt," she said gently. "Albrecht is below. May I send to the station for my luggage?"

"Of course, and your rooms shall be got ready immediately. The house will be yours before very long, perhaps. It would be strange if you could not make it your home!"

She touched a spring on her book-table, which communicated with the electric-bell, and Franz appeared promptly.

"Tell them to get Mrs. Greswold's old rooms ready at once, and send Albrecht to the station for the luggage," ordered Miss Fausset, with something of her old decisiveness. "Louisa is with you, I suppose?" she added to her niece.

"Louisa is at the station, looking after my things. Albrecht leaves me to-day. He has been a

good servant, and I think he has had an easy place. I have not been an eager traveller."

"No; you seem to have taken life at a slow pace. What took you to Nice? It is not a place I should have chosen if I wanted quiet."

Mildred hesitated for some moments before she replied to this question.

"You know one part of my sorrow, aunt; and I think I might trust you with the whole of that sad story. I went to Nice because it was the place where my husband lived with his first wife—where my unhappy sister died."

"She died at Nice?" repeated Miss Fausset, with an abstracted air, as if her power of attention, which had revived for a little just now, were beginning to flag.

"She died there, under the saddest circumstances. I am heart-broken when I think of her and that sad fate. My own dear Fay, how hard that your loving heart should be an instrument of self-torture! She was jealous of her husband—causelessly, unreasonably jealous—and she killed herself in a paroxysm of despair!"

The awfulness of this fact roused Miss Fausset from her apathy. She started up from amongst her cushions, staring at Mildred in mute horror, and her wasted hands trembled as they grasped the arm of her chair.

"Surely, surely that can't be true!" she faltered. "It is too dreadful! People tell such lies—an accident, perhaps, exaggerated into a suicide. An overdose of an opiate!"

"No, no; it was nothing like that. There is no doubt. I heard it from those who knew. She flung herself over the edge of the cliff; she was walking with her husband—my husband, George Greswold—then George Ransome; they were walking together; they quarrelled; he said something that stung her to the quick, and she threw herself over the cliff. It was the wild impulse of a moment, for which an all-merciful God would not hold her accountable. She was in very delicate health, nervous, hysterical, and she fancied herself unloved, betrayed, perhaps. Ah, aunt, think how hardly she had been used—cast off, disowned, sent out alone into the world—by those who should have loved and protected her.

Poor, poor Fay! My mother sent her away from The Hook where she was so happy. My mother's jealousy drove her out—a young girl, so friendless, so lonely, so much in need of love. It was my mother's doing; but my father ought not to have allowed it. If she was weak he was strong, and Fay was his daughter. It was his duty to protect her against all the world. You know how I loved my father; you know that I reverence his memory; but he played a coward's part when he sent Fay out of his house to please my mother."

She was carried away by her passionate regret for that ill-used girl whose image had never lost its hold upon her heart.

"Not a word against your father, Mildred. He was a good man. He never failed in affection or in duty. He acted for the best according to his lights in relation to that unhappy girl—unhappy—ill-used—yes, yes, yes. He did his best, Mildred. He must not be blamed. But it is dreadful to think that she killed herself."

"Had you heard nothing of her fate, aunt? My father must have been told, surely. There

must have been some means of communication. He must have kept himself informed about her fate, although she was banished, given over to the care of strangers. If he had owned a dog which other people took care of for him he would have been told when the dog died."

Miss Fausset felt the unspeakable bitterness of this comparison.

"You must not speak like that of your father, Mildred. You ought to know that he was a good man. Yes, he knew, of course, when that poor girl died, but it was not his business to tell other people. I only heard incidentally that she had married, and that she died within a year of her marriage. I heard no more. It was the end of a sad story."

Again there was an interval of silence. It was six o'clock; the sun was going down over the sea beyond the West Pier, and the lawn, and the fashionable garden where the gay world congregates; and this eastern end of the long white sea-front was lapsing into grayness, through which a star shone dimly here and there. It looked a cold, dull world after the pink hotel and the green shut-

ters, the dusty palms and the turquoise sea of the Promenade des Anglais; but Mildred was glad to be in England, glad to be so much nearer him whose life companion she could never be again.

Franz brought her some tea presently, and informed her that her rooms were ready, and that Louisa had arrived with the luggage. Albrecht had left his humble duty for his honoured mistress, and was gone.

"When your father died, you looked through his papers and letters, no doubt?" said Miss Fausset presently, after a pause in the conversation.

"Yes, aunt, I looked through my dear father's letters, and arranged everything with our old family solicitor, Mr. Cresswell," answered Mildred, surprised at a question which seemed to have no bearing upon anything that had gone before.

"And you found no documents relating to—that unhappy girl?"

"Not a line—not a word. But I had not expected to find anything. The history of her birth was the one dark secret of my father's life—he would naturally leave no trace of the story."

"Naturally, if he were wiser than most people. But I have observed that men of business have a passion for preserving documents, even when they are worthless. People keep compromising papers with the idea of destroying them on their death-beds, or when they feel the end is near; and then death comes without warning, and the papers remain. Your father's end was somewhat sudden."

"Sadly sudden. When he left Enderby in the autumn he was in excellent health. The shooting had been better than usual that year, and I think he had enjoyed it as much as the youngest of our party. And then he went back to London, and the London fogs—caught cold, neglected himself, and we were summoned to Parchment Street to find him dying of inflammation of the lungs. It was terrible—such a brief farewell, such an irreparable loss."

"I was not sent for," said Miss Fausset severely. "And yet I loved your father dearly."

"It was wrong, aunt; but we hoped against hope almost to the last. It was only within a few hours of the end that we knew the case was hopeless, and to summon you would have been to give

him the idea that he was dying. George and I pretended that our going to him was accidental. We were so fearful of alarming him."

"Well, I daresay you acted for the best; but it was a heavy blow for me to be told that he was gone—my only brother—almost my only friend."

"Pray don't say that, aunt. I hope you know that I love you."

"My dear, you love me because I am your father's sister. You consider it your duty to love me. My brother loved me for my own sake. He was a noble-hearted man."

Miss Fausset and her niece dined together *tête-à-tête*, and spent the evening quietly on each side of the hearth, with their books and work, the kind of work which encourages pensive brooding, as the needle travels slowly over the fabric.

"I wonder you have no pets, aunt—no favourite dog."

"I have never cared for that kind of affection, Mildred. I am of too hard a nature, perhaps. My heart does not open itself to dogs and cats, and parrots are my abomination. I am not like the

typical spinster. My only solace in the long weary years has been in going among people who are more unhappy than myself. I have put myself face to face with sordid miseries, with heavy life-long burdens; and I have asked myself, What is *your* trouble compared with these?"

"Dear aunt, it seems to me that your life must have been particularly free from trouble and care."

"Perhaps, in its outward aspect. I am rich, and I have been looked up to. But do you think those long years of loneliness—the aimless, monotonous pilgrimage through life—have not been a burden? Do you think I have not—sometimes, at any rate—envied other women their children and their husbands—the atmosphere of domestic love, even with its attendant cares and sorrows? Do you suppose that I could live for a quarter of a century as I have lived, and not feel the burden of my isolation? I have made people care for me through their self-interest. I have made people honour me, because I have the means of helping them. But who is there who cares for me, Gertrude Fausset?"

"You cannot have done so much for others without being sincerely loved in return."

"With a kind of love, perhaps—a love that has been bought."

"Why did you never marry, aunt?"

"Because I was an heiress and a good match, and distrusted every man who wanted to marry me. I made a vow to myself, before my twentieth birthday, that I would never listen to words of love or give encouragement to a lover; and I most scrupulously kept that vow. I was called a handsome woman in those days; but I was not an attractive woman at any time. Nature had made me of too hard a clay."

"It was a pity that you should keep love at arm's length."

"Far better than to have been fooled by shams, as I might have been. Don't say any more about it, Mildred. I made my vow, and I kept it."

Mildred resigned herself quietly to the idea of the dull slow life in Lewes Crescent. This duty of solacing her aunt's declining days was the only duty that remained to her, except that wider duty of

caring for the helpless and the wretched. And she told herself that there could be no better school in which to learn how to help others than the house of Miss Fausset, who had given so much of her life to the poor.

She had been told to consider her aunt's house as her own, and that she was at liberty to receive Pamela there as much and as often as she liked. She did not think that Pamela would be long without a settled home. Mr. Stuart's admiration and Lady Lochinvar's wishes had been obvious; and Mildred daily expected a gushing letter from the fickle damsel, announcing her engagement to the Scotchman.

At four o'clock on the day after Mildred's arrival, Miss Fausset's friends began to drop in for afternoon tea and talk, and Mildred was surprised to see how her aunt rallied in that long-familiar society. It seemed as if the praises and flatteries of these people acted upon her like strong wine. The languid attitude, the weary expression of the pale drawn face, were put aside. She sat erect again; her eyes brightened, her ear was alert to follow three or four

conversations at a time; nothing escaped her. Mildred began to think that she had lived upon the praises of men rather than upon the approval of conscience—that these assiduities and flatteries of a very commonplace circle were essential to her happiness.

Mr. Maltravers came after the vesper service, full of life and conversation, vigorous, self-satisfied, with an air of Papal dominion and Papal infallibility, so implicitly believed in by his flock that he had learned to believe as implicitly in himself. The flock was chiefly feminine, and worshipped without limit or reservation. There were husbands and sons, brothers and nephews, who went to church with their womenkind on Sunday; but these were for the most part without enthusiasm for Mr. Maltravers. Their idea of public worship went scarcely beyond considering Sunday morning service a respectable institution, not to be dispensed with lightly.

Mr. Maltravers welcomed Mildred with touching friendliness.

"I knew you would not fail your aunt in the hour of need," he said; "and now I hope you are

going to stay with her, and to take up her work when she lays it down, so that the golden thread of womanly charity may be unbroken."

"I hope I may be able to take up her work. I shall stay with her as long as she needs me."

"That is well. You found her sadly changed, did you not?"

"Yes, she is much changed. Yet how bright she looks this afternoon! what interest she takes in the conversation!"

"The flash of the falchion in the worn-out scabbard," said Mr. Maltravers.

A layman might have said sword, but Mr. Maltravers preferred falchion, as a more picturesque word. Half the success of his preaching had lain in the choice of picturesque words. There were sceptics among his masculine congregation who said there were no ideas in his sermons; only fine words, romantic similes—a perpetual recurrence of fountains and groves, sunset splendours and roseate dawns, golden gates and starry canopies, seas of glass, harps of gold. But if his female worshippers felt better and holier after listening to him, what

could one ask more?—and they all declared that it was so. They came out of church spiritualised, overflowing with Christian love, and gave their pence eagerly to the crossing-sweepers on their way home.

The dropping in and the tea-drinking went on for nearly two hours. Mr. Maltravers took four cups of tea, and consumed a good deal of bread-and-butter, abstaining from the chocolate biscuits and the pound-cake which the ladies of the party affected; abstaining on principle, as saints and eremites of old abstained from high living. He allowed himself to enjoy the delicate aroma of the tea and the delicately-cut bread-and-butter. He was a bachelor, and lived poorly upon badly-cooked food at his vicarage. His only personal indulgence was in the accumulation of a theological library, in which all the books were of a High Church cast.

When the visitors were all gone Miss Fausset sank back into her chair, white and weary-looking, and Mildred left her to take a little nap while she went up to her own room, half boudoir, half dressing-room, a spacious apartment, with a fine sea-

view. Here she sat in a reverie, and watched the fading sky and the slow dim stars creeping out one by one.

Was she really to take up her aunt's work, to live in a luxurious home, a lonely loveless woman, and to go out in a methodical, almost mechanical way so many times a week, to visit among the poor? Would such a life as that satisfy her in all the long slow years?

The time would come, perhaps, when she would find peace in such a life—when her heart would know no grief except the griefs of others; when she would have cast off the fetters of selfish cares and selfish yearnings, and would stand alone, as saints and martyrs and holy women of old had stood—alone with God and His poor. There were women she knew, even in these degenerate days, who so lived and so worked, seeking no guerdon but the knowledge of good done in this world, and the hope of the crown immortal. Her day of sacrifice had not yet come. She had not been able to dissever her soul from the hopes and sorrows of earth. She had not been able to forget the husband she had forsaken—

even for a single hour. When she knelt down to pray at night, when she awoke in the morning, her thoughts were with him. "How does he bear his solitude? Has he learnt to forget me and to be happy?" Those questions were ever present to her mind.

And now at Brighton, knowing herself so near him, her heart yearned more than ever for the sight of the familiar face, for the sound of the beloved voice. She pored over the time-table, and calculated the length of the journey—the time lost at Portsmouth and Bishopstoke — every minute until the arrival at Romsey; and then the drive to Enderby. She pictured the lanes in the early May — the hedgerows bursting into leaf, the banks where the primroses were opening, the tender young ferns just beginning to uncurl their feathery fronds, the spear-points of the hartstongue shooting up amidst rank broad docks, and lords and ladies, and the flower on the leafless blackthorn making patches of white amongst the green.

How easy it was to reach him! how natural it would seem to hasten to him after half a year of exile!

and yet she must not. She had pledged herself to honour the law; to obey the letter and the spirit of that harsh law which decreed that her sister's husband could not be hers.

She knew that he was at Enderby, and she had some ground for supposing that he was well, and even contented. She had seen the letters which he had written to his niece. He had written about the shooting, his horses, his dogs; and there had been no word to indicate that he was out of health, or in low spirits. Mildred had pored over those brief letters, forgetting to return them to their rightful owner, cherishing them as if they made a kind of link between her and the love she had resigned.

How firm the hand was!—that fine and individual penmanship which she had so admired in the past—the hand in which her first love-letter had been written. It was but little altered in fifteen years. She recalled the happy hour when she received that first letter from her affianced husband. He had gone to London a day or two after their betrothal, eager to make all arrangements for their marriage, impatient for settlements and legal ma-

chinery which should make their union irrevocable, full of plans for immediate improvements at Enderby.

She remembered how she ran out into the garden to read that first letter—a long letter, though they had been parted less than a day when it was written. She had gone to the remotest nook in that picturesque riverside garden, a rustic bower by the water's edge, an osier arbour over which her own hands had trained the Céline Forestieri roses. They were in flower on that happy day—clusters of pale yellow bloom, breathing perfume round her as she sat beneath the blossoming arch and devoured her lover's fond words. O, how bright life had been then for both of them!—for her without a cloud.

He was well—that was something to know; but it was not enough. Her heart yearned for fuller knowledge of his life than those letters gave. Wounded pride might have prompted that cheerful tone. He might wish her to think him happy and at ease without her. He thought that she had used him ill. It was natural, perhaps, that he should think so, since he could not see things as she saw them. He had not her deep-rooted convictions.

She thought of him and wondered about him till the desire for further knowledge grew into an aching pain. She must write to some one; she must do something to quiet this gnawing anxiety. In her trouble she thought of all her friends in the neighbourhood of Enderby; but there was none in whom she could bring herself to confide except Rollinson, the curate. She had thought first of writing to the doctor, but he was something of a gossip, and would be likely to prattle to his patients about her letter, and her folly in forsaking so good a husband. Rollinson she felt she might trust. He was a thoughtful young man, despite his cheery manners and some inclination to facetiousness of a strictly clerical order. He was one of a large family, and had known trouble, and Mildred had been especially kind to him and to the sisters who from time to time had shared his apartments at the carpenter's, and had revelled in the gaieties of Enderby parish, the penny-reading at the schoolhouse, the sale of work for the benefit of the choir, and an occasional afternoon for tea and tennis at the Manor. Those maiden sisters of the curate's had known and admired Lola, and Mr.

Rollinson had been devoted to her from his first coming to the parish, when she was a lovely child of seven.

Mildred wrote fully and frankly to the curate.

"I cannot enter upon the motive of our separation," she wrote, "except so far as to tell you that it is a question of principle which has parted us. My husband has been blameless in all his domestic relations, the best of husbands, the noblest of men. Loving him with all my heart, trusting and honouring him as much as on my wedding-day, I yet felt it my duty to leave him. I should not make this explanation to any one else at Enderby, but I wish you to know the truth. If people ever question you about my reasons you can tell them that it is my intention ultimately to enter an Anglican Sisterhood, or it may be to found a Sisterhood, and to devote my declining years to my sorrowing fellow-creatures. This is my fixed intention, but my vocation is yet weak. My heart cleaves to the old home and all that I lost in leaving it.

"And now, my kind friend, I want you to tell me how my husband fares in his solitude. If he

were ill and unhappy he would be too generous to complain to me. Tell me how he is in health and spirits. Tell me of his daily life, his amusements, occupations. There is not the smallest detail which will not interest me. You see him, I hope, often; certainly you are likely to see him oftener than any one else in the parish. Tell me all you can, and be assured of my undying gratitude.—Ever sincerely yours, MILDRED GRESWOLD."

Mr. Rollinson's reply came by return of post:

"I am very glad you have written to me, dear Mrs. Greswold. Had I known your address, I think I should have taken the initiative, and written to you. Believe me, I respect your motive for the act which has, I fear, cast a blight upon a good man's life; and I will venture to say no more than that the motive should be a very strong one which forces you to persevere in a course that has wrecked your husband's happiness, and desolated one of the most delightful and most thoroughly Christian homes I had ever the privilege of entering. I look back and recall what Enderby Manor was, and I think what it

is now, and I can hardly compare those two pictures without tears.

"You ask me to tell you frankly all I can tell about your husband's mode of life, his health and spirits. All I can tell is summed up in four words: his heart is broken. In my deep concern about his desolate position, in my heartfelt regard for him, I have ventured to force my society upon him sometimes when I could not doubt it was unwelcome. He received me with all his old kindness of manner; but I am sympathetic enough to know when a man only endures my company, and I know that his feeling was at best endurance. But I believe that he trusts me, and that he was less upon his guard with me than he is with other acquaintances. I have seen him put on an appearance of cheerfulness with other people. I have heard him talk to other people as if life had in nowise lost its interest for him. With me he dropped the mask. I saw him brooding by his hearth, as he broods when he is alone. I heard his involuntary sighs. I saw the image of a shipwrecked existence. Indeed, Mrs. Greswold, there is nothing else that I can tell

you if you would have me truthful. You have broken his heart. You have sacrificed your love to a principle, you say. You should be very sure of your principle. You ask me as to his habits and occupations. I believe they are about as monotonous as those of a galley-slave. He walks a great deal—in all weathers and at all hours—but rarely beyond his own land. I don't think he often rides; and he has not hunted once during the season. He did a little shooting in October and November, quite alone. He has had no staying visitor within his doors since you left him.

"I have reason to know that he goes to the churchyard every evening at dusk, and spends some time beside your daughter's grave. I have seen him there several times when it was nearly dark, and he had no apprehension of being observed. You know how rarely any one enters our quiet little burial-ground, and how complete a solitude it is at that twilight hour. I am about the only passer-by, and even I do not pass within sight of the old yew-tree above your darling's resting-place, unless I go a little out of my way between the vestry-door and the

lych-gate. I have often gone out of my way to note that lonely figure by the grave. Be assured, dear Mrs. Greswold, that in sending you this gloomy picture of a widowed life I have had no wish to distress you. I have exaggerated nothing. I wish you to know the truth; and if it lies within your power—without going against your conscience—to undo that which you have done, I entreat you to do so without delay. There may not be much time to be lost.—Believe me, devotedly and gratefully your friend, FREDERICK ROLLINSON."

Mildred shed bitter tears over the curate's letter. How different the picture it offered from that afforded by George Greswold's own letters, in which he had written cheerily of the shooting, the dogs and horses, the changes in the seasons, and the events of the outer world! That frank easy tone had been part of his armour of pride. He would not abase himself by the admission of his misery. He had guessed, no doubt, that his wife would read those letters, and he would not have her know the extent of the ruin she had wrought.

She thought of him in his solitude, pictured him beside their child's grave, and the longing to look upon him once more—unseen by him, if it could be so—became irresistible. She determined to see with her own eyes if he were as unhappy as Mr. Rollinson supposed. She, who knew him so well, would be better able to judge by his manner and bearing—better able to divine the inner workings of his heart and mind. It had been a habit of her life to read his face, to guess his thoughts before they found expression in words. He had never been able to keep a secret from her, except that one long-hidden story of the past; and even there she had known that there was something. She had seen the shadow of that abiding remorse.

"I am going to leave you for two days, aunt," she said rather abruptly, on the morning after she received Rollinson's letter. "I want to look at Lola's grave. I shall go from here to Enderby as fast as the train will take me; spend an hour in the churchyard; go on to Salisbury for the night; and come back to you to-morrow afternoon."

"You mean that you are going back to your husband?"

"No, no. I may see him, perhaps, by accident. I shall not enter the Manor House. I am going to the churchyard—nowhere else."

"You would be wiser if you went straight home. Remember, years hence, when I am dead and gone, that I told you as much. You must do as you like—stay at an inn at Salisbury, while your own beautiful home is empty, or anything else that is foolish and wrong-headed. You had better let Franz go with you."

"Thanks, aunt; I would not take him away on any account. I can get on quite well by myself."

She left Brighton at midday, lost a good deal of time at the two junctions, and drove to within a few hundred yards of Enderby Church just as the bright May day was melting into evening. There was a path across some meadows at the back of the village that led to the churchyard. She stopped the fly by the meadow-gate, and told the man to drive round to Mr. Rollinson's lodgings, and wait for her there; and then she walked slowly along the narrow footpath, between the long grass, golden with buttercups in the golden evening.

It was a lovely evening. There was a little wood of oaks and chestnuts on her left hand as she approached the churchyard, and the shrubberies of Enderby Manor were on her right. The trees she knew so well—her own trees—the tall mountain-ash and the clump of beeches, rose above the lower level of lilacs and laburnums, acacia and rose maple. There was a nightingale singing in the thick foliage yonder—there was always a nightingale at this season somewhere in the shrubbery. She had lingered many a time with her husband to listen to that unmistakable melody.

The dark foliage of the churchyard made an inky blot midst all that vernal greenery. Those immemorial yews, which knew no change with the changing years, spread their broad shadows over the lowly graves, and made night in God's acre while it was yet day in the world outside. Mildred went into the churchyard as if into the realm of death. The shadows closed round her on every side, and the change from light to gloom chilled her as she walked slowly towards the place where her child was lying.

Yes, he was there, just as the curate had told her. He stood leaning against the long horizontal branch of the old yew, looking down at the marble which bore his daughter's name. He was very pale, and his sunken eyes and hollow cheeks told of failing health. He stood motionless, in a gloomy reverie. His wife watched him from a little way off; she stood motionless as himself—stood and watched him till the beating of her heart sounded so loud in her own ears that she thought he too must hear that passionate throbbing.

She had thought when she set out on her journey that it would be sufficient for her just to see him, and that having seen him she would go away and leave him without his ever knowing that she had looked upon him. But now the time had come it was not enough. The impulse to draw nearer and to speak to him was too strong to be denied: she went with tottering footsteps to the side of the grave, and called him by his name:

"George! George!" holding out her hands to him piteously.

CHAPTER VIII.

"HOW SHOULD I GREET THEE?"

THE marble countenance scarcely changed as he looked up at her. He took no notice of the outstretched hands.

"What brings you here, Mildred?" he asked coldly.

"I heard that you were ill; I wanted to see for myself," she faltered.

"I am not ill, and I have not been ill. You were misinformed."

"I was told you were unhappy."

"Did you require to be told that? You did not expect to hear that I was particularly happy, I suppose? At my age men have forgotten how to forget."

"It would be such a relief to my mind if you could find new occupations, new interests, as I hope to do by and by—a wider horizon. You are so

clever. You have so many gifts, and it is a pity to bury them all here."

"My heart is buried here," he answered, looking down at the grave.

"Your heart, yes; but you might find work for your mind—a noble career before you—in politics, in philanthropy."

"I am not ambitious, and I am too old to adapt myself to a new life. I prefer to live as I am living. Enderby is my hermitage. It suits me well enough."

There was a silence after this—a silence of despair. Mildred knelt on the dewy grass, and bent herself over the marble cross, and kissed the cold stone. She could reach no nearer than that marble to the child she loved. Her lips lingered there. Her heart ached with a dull pain, and she felt the utter hopelessness of her life more keenly than she had felt it yet. If she could but die there, at his feet, and make an end!

She rose after some minutes. Her husband's attitude was unchanged; but he looked at her now, for the first time, with a direct and earnest gaze.

"What took you to Nice?" he asked.

"I wanted to know—all about my unhappy sister."

"And you are satisfied—you know all; and you think as some of my neighbours thought of me. You believe that I killed my wife."

"George, can you think so meanly of me—your wife of fourteen years?"

"You spare me, then, so far, in spite of circumstantial evidence. You do not think of me as a murderer?"

"I have never for a moment doubted your goodness to that unhappy girl," she answered, with a stifled sob. "I am sorry for her with all my heart; but I cannot blame you."

"There you are wrong. I was to blame. You know that I do not easily lose my temper—to a woman, least of all; but that day I lost control over myself—lost patience with her just when she was in greatest need of my forbearance. She was nervous and hysterical. I forgot her weakness. I spoke to her cruelly—lashed and goaded by her causeless jealousies—so persistent, so irritating—like the continual dropping of water. How I have suffered

for that moment of anger God alone can know. If remorse can be expiation, I have expiated that unpremeditated sin!"

"Yes, yes, I know how you have suffered. Your dreams have told me."

"Ah, those dreams! You can never imagine the agony of them. To fancy her walking by my side, bright and happy, as she so seldom was upon this earth, and to tell myself that I had never been unkind to her, that her suicide was a dream and a delusion, and then to feel the dull cold reality creep back into my brain, and to know that I was guilty of her death. Yes, I have held myself guilty. I have never paltered with my conscience. Had I been patient to the end, she might have lived to be the happy mother of my child. Her whole life might have been changed. I never loved her, Mildred. Fate and her own impulsive nature flung her into my arms; but I accepted the charge; I made myself responsible to God and my own conscience for her well-being."

Mildred's only answer was a sob. She stretched out her hand, and laid it falteringly upon the hand

that hung loose across the branch of the yew, as if in token of trustfulness.

"Did you find out anything more in your retrospective gropings—at Nice?" he asked, with a touch of bitterness.

She was silent.

"Did you hear that I was out of my mind after my wife's death?"

"Yes."

"Did that shock you? Did it horrify you to know you had lived fourteen years with a *ci-devant* lunatic?"

"George, how can you say such things! I could perfectly understand how your mind was affected by that dreadful event—how the strongest brain might be unhinged by such a sorrow. I can sympathise with you, and understand you in the past as I can in the present. How can you forget that I am your wife, a part of yourself, able to read all your thoughts?"

"I cannot forget that you have been my wife; but your sympathy and your affection seem very far off now—as remote almost as that tragedy which

darkened my youth. It is all past and done with—the sorrow and pain, the hope and gladness. I have done with everything—except my regret for my child."

"Can you believe that I feel the parting less than you, George?" she asked piteously.

"I don't know. The parting is your work. You have the satisfaction of self-sacrifice—the pride which women who go to church twice a day have in renouncing earthly happiness. They school themselves first in trifles—giving up this and that—theatres, fiction, cheerful society—and then their ambition widens. These petty sacrifices are not enough, and they renounce a husband and a home. If the husband cannot see the necessity, and cannot kiss the rod, so much the worse for him. His wife has the perverted pride of an Indian widow who flings her young life upon the funeral pile, jubilant at the thought of her own exalted virtue."

"Would you not sacrifice your happiness to your conscience, George, if conscience spoke plainly?" Mildred asked reproachfully.

"I don't know. Human love might be too strong

for conscience. God knows I would not have sacrificed you to a scruple—to a law made by man. God's laws are different. There is no doubt about them."

The evening was darkening. The nightingale burst out suddenly into loud melody, more joyous than her reputation. Mildred could see the lights in the house that had been her home. The lamplight in the drawing-room shone across the intervening space of lawn and shrubberies; the broad window shone vividly at the end of a vista, like a star. O lovely room, O happy life; so far off, so impossible for evermore!

"Good-night and good-bye," Mildred sighed, holding out her hand.

"Good-bye," he answered, taking the small cold hand, only to let it drop again.

He made no inquiry as to how she had come there, or whither she was going. She had appeared to him suddenly as a spirit in the soft eventide, and he let her go from him unquestioned, as if she had been a spirit. She felt the coldness of her dismissal, and yet felt that it could be no otherwise. She must

be all to him or nothing. After love so perfect as theirs had been there could be no middle course.

She went across the meadow by the way she had come, and through the village street, where all the doors were closed at this hour, and paraffin-lamps glowed brightly in parlour-windows. Dear little humble street, how her heart yearned over it as she went silently by like a ghost, closely veiled, a slender figure dressed in black! She had been very fond of her villagers, had entered into their lives and been a brightening influence for most of them, she and her child. Lola had been familiar with every creature in the place, from the humpbacked cobbler at the corner to the gray-haired postmaster in the white half-timbered cottage yonder, where the letter-boxes were approached by a narrow path across a neat little garden. Lola had entered into all their lives, and had been glad and sorry with them with a power of sympathy which was the only precocious element in her nature. She had been a child in all things except charity; there she had been a woman.

There was a train for Salisbury in half-an-hour, and there was a later train at ten o'clock. Mildred

had intended to travel at the earlier hour, but she felt an irresistible inclination to linger in the beloved place where her happiness was buried. She wanted to see some one who would talk to her of her husband, and she knew that the curate could be trusted; so she determined upon waiting for the later train, in the event of her finding Mr. Rollinson at home.

The paraffin-lamp in the parlour over the carpenter's shop was brighter than any other in the village, and Mr. Rollinson's shadow was reflected on the blind, with the usual tendency towards caricature. The carpenter's wife, who opened the door, was an old friend of Mrs. Greswold's, and was not importunate in her expressions of surprise and pleasure.

"Please do not mention to any one that I have been at Enderby, Mrs. Mason," Mildred said quietly. "I am only here for an hour or two on my way to Salisbury. I should like to see Mr. Rollinson, if he is disengaged."

"Of course he is, ma'am, for you. He'll be overjoyed to see you, I'm sure."

Mrs. Mason bustled up the steep little staircase,

followed closely by Mildred. She flung open the door with a flourish, and discovered Mr. Rollinson enjoying a tea-dinner, with the *Times* propped up between his plate and the teapot.

He started to his feet at sight of his visitor like a man distraught, darted forward and shook hands with Mildred, then glanced despairingly at the table. For such a guest he would have liked to have had turtle and ortolans; but a tea-dinner, a vulgar tea-dinner—a dish of pig's trotters, a couple of new-laid eggs, and a pile of buttered toast! He had thought it a luxurious meal when he sat down to it, five minutes ago, very sharp set.

"My dear Mrs. Greswold, I am enchanted. You have been travelling? Yes. If—if you would share my humble collation—but you are going to dine at the Manor, no doubt."

"No; I am not going to the Manor. I should be very glad of a cup of tea, if I may have one with you."

"Mrs. Mason, a fresh teapot, directly, if you please."

"Yes, sir."

"And could you not get some dinner for Mrs. Greswold? A sole and a chicken, a little asparagus. I saw a bundle in the village the day before yesterday," suggested the curate feebly.

"On no account. I could not eat any dinner. I will have an egg and a little toast, if you please," said Mildred, seeing the curate's distressed look, and not wishing to reject his hospitality.

"Will you really, now? Mrs. Mason's eggs are excellent; and she makes toast better than any one else in the world, I think," replied Rollinson, flinging his napkin artfully over the trotters, and with a side glance at Mrs. Mason which implored their removal.

That admirable woman grasped the situation. She whisked off the dish, and the curate's plate with its litter of bones and mustard. She swept away crumbs, tidied the tea-tray, brought a vase of spring flowers from a cheffonier to adorn the table, lighted a pair of wax candles on the mantelpiece, and gave a touch of elegance to the humble sitting-room, while Mildred was taking off her mantle and bonnet, and sinking wearily into Mr. Rollinson's easy-chair

by the hearth, where a basket of fir-cones replaced the winter fire.

She felt glad to be with this old familiar friend —glad to breathe the very air of Enderby after her six months' exile.

"Your letter frightened me," she said, when she was alone with the curate. "I came to look at my husband. I could not help coming."

"Ah, dear Mrs. Greswold, if you could only come back for good—nothing else is of any use. Have you seen him?"

"Yes," she sighed.

"And you find him sadly changed?"

"Sadly changed. I wish you would try to rouse him—to interest him in farming—building—politics —anything. He is so clever; he ought to have so many resources."

"For his mind, perhaps; but not for his heart. You are doing all you can to break that."

Mildred turned her head aside with a weary movement, as of a creature at bay.

"Don't talk about it. You cannot understand.

You look up to Clement Cancellor, I think. You would respect his opinion."

"Yes; he is a good man."

"He is—and he approves the course I have taken. He is my confidant and my counsellor."

"You could have no better adviser in a case of conscience—yet I can but regret my friend's ruined life, all the same. But I will say no more, Mrs. Greswold. I will respect your reserve."

Mrs. Mason came bustling in with a tea-tray, on which her family teapot—the silver teapot that had been handed down from generation to generation since the days of King George the Third—and her very best pink and gold china sparkled and glittered in the lamp-light. The toast and eggs might have tempted an anchorite, and Mildred had eaten nothing since her nine-o'clock breakfast. The strong tea revived her like good old wine, and she sat resting and listening with interest to Mr. Rollinson's account of his parishioners, and the village chronicle of the last six months. How sweet it was to hear the old familiar names, to be in the old place, if only for a brief hour!

"I wonder if they miss me?" she speculated. "They never seemed quite the same—after—after the fever."

"Ah, but they know your value now. They have missed you sadly, and they have missed your husband's old friendly interest in their affairs. He has given me *carte blanche*, and there has been no one neglected, nothing left undone; but they miss the old personal relations, the friendship of past days. You must not think that the poor care only for creature comforts and substantial benefits."

"I have never thought so. And now tell me all you can about my husband. Does he receive no one?"

"No one. People used to call upon him for a month or two after you left, but he never returned their visits, he declined all invitations, and he made his friends understand pretty clearly that he had done with the outside world. He rarely comes to the eleven-o'clock service on Sundays, but he comes to the early services, and I believe he walks into Romsey sometimes for the evening service. He has not hardened his heart against his God."

"Do you see him often?"

"About once a week. I take him my report of the sick and poor. I believe he is as much interested in that as he can be in anything; but I always feel that my society is a burden to him, in spite of his courteousness. I borrow a book from him sometimes, so as to have an excuse for spending a few minutes with him when I return it."

"You are a good man, Mr. Rollinson, a true friend," said Mildred, in a low voice.

"Would to God that my friendship could do more for him! Unhappily it can do so little."

The fly came back for Mildred at nine o'clock. She had telegraphed from Brighton to the inn at Salisbury where she was to spend the night, and her room was ready for her when she arrived there at half-past ten: a spacious bedroom with a four-post bed, in which she lay broad awake all night, living over and over again that scene beside the grave, and seeing her husband's gloomy face, and its mute reproach. She knew that she had done wrong in breaking in upon his solitude, she who renounced the tie that bound her to him; and yet there had

been something gained. He knew now that under no stress of evidence could she ever believe him guilty of his wife's death. He knew that his last and saddest secret was revealed to her, and that she was loyal to him still—loyal although divided.

She went to the morning service at the Cathedral. She lingered about the grave old Close, looking dreamily in at the gardens which had such an air of old-world peace. She was reluctant to leave Salisbury. It was near all that she had loved and lost. The place had the familiar air of the district in which she had lived so long—different in somewise from all other places, or seeming different by fond association.

She telegraphed to her aunt that she might be late in returning, and lingered on till three o'clock in the afternoon, and then took the train, which dawdled at three or four stations before it came to Bishopstoke —the familiar junction where the station-master and the superintendents knew her, and asked after her husband's health, giving her a pain at her heart with each inquiry. She would have been glad to pass to the Portsmouth train unrecognised, but it was not to be.

"You have been in the South all the winter, I hear, ma'am. I hope it was not on account of your health?"

"Yes," she faltered, "partly on that account," as she hurried on to the carriage which the station-master opened for her with his own hand.

His face was among her home faces. She had travelled up and down the line very often in the good days that were gone—with her husband and Lola, and their comfort had been cared for almost as if they had been royal personages.

It was night when she reached Brighton, and Franz was on the platform waiting for her, and the irreproachable brougham was drawn up close by, the brown horse snorting, and with eyes of fire, not brooking the vicinity of the engine, though too grand a creature to know fear.

She found Miss Fausset in low spirits.

"I have missed you terribly," she said. "I am a poor creature. I used to think myself independent of sympathy or companionship—but that is all over now. When I am alone for two days at a stretch I feel like a child in the dark."

"You have lived too long in this house, aunt, I think," Mildred answered gently. "Forgive me if I say that it is a dull house."

"A dull house? Nonsense, Mildred! It is one of the best houses in Brighton."

"Yes, yes, aunt, but it is dull, all the same. The sun does not shine into it; the colouring of the furniture is gray and cold—"

"I hate gaudy colours."

"Yes, but there are beautiful colours that are not gaudy—beautiful things that warm and gladden one. The next room," glancing back at the front drawing-room and its single lamp, "is full of ghosts. Those long white curtains, those faint gray walls, are enough to kill you."

"I am not so fanciful as that."

"Ah, but you are fanciful, perhaps without knowing it. The influence of this dull gray house may have crept into your veins and depressed you unawares. Will you go to the Italian Lakes with me next September, aunt? Or, better, will you go to the West of England with me next week—to the north coast of Cornwall, which will be lovely at this

season? I am sure you want change. This monotonous life is killing you."

"No, no, Mildred. There is nothing amiss with my life. It suits me well enough, and I am able to do good."

"Your lieutenants could carry on all that while you were away."

"No; I like to be here; I like to organise, to arrange. I can feel that my life is not useless, that my talent is placed at interest."

"It could all go on, aunt; it could indeed. The change to new scenes would revive you."

"No. I am satisfied where I am. I am among people whom I like, and who like and respect me."

She dwelt upon the last words with unction, as if there were tangible comfort in them.

Mildred sighed and was silent. She had felt it her duty to try and rouse her aunt from the dull apathy into which she seemed gradually sinking, and she thought that the only chance of revival was to remove her from the monotony of her present existence.

Later on in the evening the fire had been lighted

in the inner drawing-room, Miss Fausset feeling chilly, in spite of the approach of summer, and aunt and niece drew near the hearth for cheerfulness and comfort. The low reading-lamp spread its light only over Miss Fausset's book-table and the circle in which it stood. The faces of both women were in shadow, and the lofty room with its walls of books was full of shadows.

"You talk so despondently of life sometimes, aunt, as if it had been all disappointment," said Mildred, after a long silence, in which they had both sat watching the fire, each absorbed by her own thoughts; "yet your girlhood must have been bright. I have heard my dear father say how indulgent *his* father was, how he gave way to his children in everything."

"Yes, he was very indulgent; too indulgent perhaps. I had my own way in everything; only—one's own way does not always lead to happiness. Mine did not. I might have been a happier woman if my father had been a tyrant."

"You would have married, perhaps, in that case, to escape from an unhappy home. I wish you

would tell me more about your girlish years, aunt. You must have had many admirers when you were young, and amongst them all there must have been some one for whom you cared—just a little. Would it hurt you to talk to me about that old time?"

"Yes, Mildred. There are some women who can talk about such things—women who can prose for hours to their granddaughters or their nieces—simpering over the silliness of the past—boasting of conquests which nobody believes in; for it is very difficult to realise the fact that an old woman was ever young and lovely. I am not of that temper, Mildred. The memory of my girlhood is hateful to me."

"Ah, then there was some sad story—some unhappy attachment. I was sure it must have been so," said Mildred, in a low voice. "But tell me of that happier time before you went into society—the time when you were in Italy with your governess, studying at the Conservatoire at Milan. I thought of you so much when I was at Milan the other day."

"I have nothing to tell about that time. I was a foreigner in a strange city, with an elderly woman

who was paid to take care of me, and whose chief occupation was to take care of herself: a solicitor's widow, whose health required that she should winter in the South, and who contrived to make my father pay handsomely for her benefit."

"And you were not happy at Milan?"

"Happy! no. I got on with my musical education—that was all I cared for."

"Had you no friends—no introductions to nice people?"

"No. My chaperon made my father believe that she knew all the best families in Milan, but her circle resolved itself into a few third-rate musical people who gave shabby little evening-parties. You bore me to death, Mildred, when you force me to talk of that time, and of that woman, whom I hated."

"Forgive me, aunt, I will ask no more questions," said Mildred, with a sigh.

She had been trying to get nearer to her kinswoman, to familiarise herself with that dim past when this fading life was fresh and full of hope. It seemed to her as if there was a dead wall between

her and Miss Fausset—a barrier of reserve which should not exist between those who were so near in blood. She had made up her mind to stay with her aunt to the end, to do all that duty and affection could suggest, and it troubled her that they should still be strangers. After this severe repulse she could make no further attempt. There was evidently no softening influence in the memory of the past. Miss Fausset's character, as revealed by that which she concealed rather than by that which she told, was not beautiful. Mildred could but think that she had been a proud, cold-hearted young woman, valuing herself too highly to inspire love or sympathy in others; electing to be alone and unloved.

After this, time went by in a dull monotony. The same people came to see Miss Fausset day after day, and she absorbed the same flatteries, accepted the same adulation, always with an air of deepest humility. She organised her charities, she listened to every detail about the circumstances, and even the mental condition and spiritual views of her poor. Mildred discovered before long that there was a leaven of

hardness in her benevolence. She could not tolerate sin, she weighed every life in the same balance, she expected exceptional purity amidst foulest surroundings. She was liberal of her worldly goods; but her mind was as narrow as if she had lived in a remote village a hundred years ago. Mildred found herself continually pleading for wrong-doers.

The only event or excitement which the bright June days brought with them was the arrival of Pamela Ransome, who was escorted to Brighton by Lady Lochinvar herself, and who had been engaged for the space of three weeks to Malcolm Stuart, with everybody's consent and approval.

"I wrote to Uncle George the very day I was engaged, aunt, as well as to you; and he answered my letter in the sweetest way, and he is going to give me a grand piano," said Pamela, all in a breath.

Lady Lochinvar explained that, much as she detested London, she had felt it her solemn duty to establish herself there during her nephew's engagement, in order that she might become acquainted with Pamela's people, and assist her dear boy in all his arrangements for the future. When a young

man marries a nice girl with an estate worth fifteen hundred a year—allowing for the poor return made by land nowadays—everything ought to go upon velvet. Lady Lochinvar was prepared to make sacrifices, or, in other words, to contribute a handsome portion of that fortune which she intended to bequeath to her nephew. She could afford to be generous, having a surplus far beyond her possible needs, and she was very fond of Malcolm Stuart, who had been to her as a son.

"I was quite alone in the world when my husband died," she told Mildred. "My father and my own people were all gone, and I should have been a wretched creature without Malcolm. He was the only son of Lochinvar's favourite sister, who went off in a decline when he was eight years old, and he had been brought up at the Castle. So it is natural, you see, that I should be fond of him and interested in his welfare."

Pamela kissed her, by way of commentary.

"I think you are quite the dearest thing in the world," she said, "except Aunt Mildred."

It may be seen from this remark that the elder

and younger lady were now on very easy terms. Mildred had stayed in Paris with Lady Lochinvar, and a considerable part of her trousseau, the outward and visible part, had been chosen in the *ateliers* of fashionable Parisian dressmakers and man milliners. The more humdrum portion of the bride's raiment was to be obtained at Brighton, where Pamela was to spend a week or two with her aunt before she went to London to stay with the Mountfords, who had taken a house in Grosvenor Gardens, from which Pamela was to be married.

"And where do you think we are to be married, aunt?" exclaimed Pamela excitedly.

"At St. George's?"

"Nothing so humdrum. We are going to be married in the Abbey—in Westminster Abbey—the burial-place of heroes and poets. I happened to say one day when Malcolm and I were almost strangers —it was at Rumpelmeyer's, sitting outside in the sun, eating ices—that I had never seen a wedding in the Abbey, and that I should love to see one; and Malcolm said we must try and manage it some day —meaning anybody's wedding, of course, though he

pretends now that he always meant to marry me there himself."

"Presumptious on his part," said Mildred, smiling.

"O, young men are horribly presumptious; they know they are in a minority—there is so little competition—and a plain young man, too, like Malcolm. But I suppose he knows he is nice," added Pamela conclusively.

"Don't you think it will be lovely for me to be married in the Abbey?" she asked presently.

"I think, dear, in your case I would rather have been married from my own house, and in a village church."

"What, in that poky little church at Mapledown? I believe it is one of the oldest in England, and it is certainly one of the ugliest. Sir Henry Mountford suggested making a family business of it; but Rosalind and I were both in favour of the Abbey. We shall get much better notices in the society papers," added Pamela, with a business-like air, as if she had been talking about the production of a new play.

"Well, dear, as I hope you are only to be married once in your life, you have a right to choose your church."

Pamela was bitterly disappointed presently when her aunt refused to be present at her wedding.

"I will spend an hour with you on your wedding morning, and see you in your wedding-gown, if you like, Pamela; but I cannot go among a crowd of gay people, or share in any festivity. I have done with all those things, dear, for ever and ever."

Pamela's candid eyes filled with tears. She felt all the more sorry for her aunt, because her own cup of happiness was overflowing. She looked round the silver-gray drawing-room, and her eyes fixed themselves on the piano which *he* had played, so often, so often, in the tender twilight, in the shadowy evening when that larger room was left almost without any light save that which came through the undraped archway yonder. But Castellani was no longer a person to be thought of in italics. From the moment Pamela's eyes had opened to the excellence of Mr. Stuart's manly and straightforward character, they had also become aware of the Italian's

deficiencies. She had realised the fact that he was a charlatan; and now she looked wonderingly at the piano, at a loss to understand the intensity of bygone emotions, and inclined to excuse herself upon the ground of youthful foolishness.

"What a silly romantic wretch I must have been!" she thought; "a regular Rosa Matilda! As if the happiness of life depended upon one's husband having an ear for music!"

Mildred was by no means unsympathetic about the trousseau, although she herself had done with all interest in fashion and finery. She drove about to the pretty Brighton shops with Pamela, and exercised a restraining influence upon that young lady's taste, which inclined to the florid. She sympathised with the young lady's anxiety about her wedding-gown, which was to be made by a certain Mr. Smithson, a *faiseur* who held potent sway over the ladies of fashionable London, and who gave himself more airs than a Prime Minister. Mr. Smithson had consented to make Miss Ransome a wedding-gown—despite her social insignificance and the

pressure of the season—provided that he were not worried about the affair.

"If I have too many people calling upon me, or am pestered with letters, I shall throw the thing up," he told Lady Mountford one morning, when she took him some fine old rose-point for the petticoat. "Yes, this lace is pretty good. I suppose you got it in Venice. I have seen Miss Ransome, and I know what kind of gown she can wear. It will be sent home the day before the wedding."

With this assurance, haughtily given, Lady Mountford and her sister had to be contented.

"If I were your sister I would let a woman in Tottenham Court Road make my gowns rather than I would stand such treatment," said Sir Henry; at which his wife shrugged her shoulders and told him he knew nothing about it.

"The cut is everything," she said. "It is worth putting up with Smithson's insolence to know that one is the best-dressed woman in the room."

"But if Smithson dresses all the other women—"

"He doesn't. There are very few who have the courage to go to him. His manners are so humiliat-

ing—he as good as told me I had a hump—and his prices are enormous."

"And yet you call me extravagant for giving seventy pounds for a barb!" cried Sir Henry; "a bird that might bring me a pot of money in prizes."

The grand question of trousseau and wedding-gown being settled, there remained only a point of minor importance—the honeymoon. Pamela was in favour of that silly season being spent in some rustic spot, far from the madding crowd, and Pamela's lover was of her opinion in everything.

"We have both seen the best part of the Continent," said Pamela, taking tea in Mildred's upstairs sitting-room, which had assumed a brighter and more home-like aspect in her occupation than any other room in Miss Fausset's house; "we don't want to rush off to Switzerland or the Pyrenees; we want just to enjoy each other's society and to make our plans for the future. Besides, travelling is so hideously unbecoming. I have seen brides with dusty hats and smuts on their faces who would have

been miserable if they had only known what objects they were."

"I think you and Mr. Stuart are very wise in your choice, dear," answered Mildred. "England in July is delicious. Have you decided where to go?"

"No, we can't make up our minds. We want to find a place that is exquisitely pretty—yet not too far from London, so that we may run up to town occasionally and see about our furnishing. Sir Henry offered us Rainham, but as it is both ugly and inconvenient I unhesitatingly refused. I don't want to spend my honeymoon in a place pervaded by prize pigeons."

"What do you think of the neighbourhood of the Thames, Pamela?" asked Mildred thoughtfully. "Are you fond of boating?"

"Fond! I adore it. I could live all my life upon the river."

"Really! I have been thinking that if you and Mr. Stuart would like to spend your honeymoon at The Hook it is just the kind of place to suit you.

The house is bright and pretty, and the gardens are exquisite."

Pamela's face kindled with pleasure.

"But, dear aunt, you would never think—" she began.

"The place is at your service, my dear girl. It will be a pleasure for me to prepare everything for you. I cannot tell you how dearly I love that house, or how full of memories it is for me. The lease of my father's house in Parchment Street was sold after his death, and I only kept a few special things out of the furniture, but at The Hook nothing has been altered since I was a child."

Pamela accepted the offer with rapture, and wrote an eight-page letter to her lover upon the subject, although he was coming to Brighton next day, and was to dine in Lewes Crescent. Mildred was pleased at being able to give so much pleasure to her husband's niece. It may be also that she snatched at an excuse for revisiting a spot she fondly loved.

She offered to take Pamela with her, to explore the house and gardens, and discuss any small

arrangements for the bride's comfort, but against this Miss Ransome protested.

"I want everything to be new to us," she said, "all untrodden ground, a delicious surprise. I am sure the place is lovely; and I want to know no more about it than I know of fairyland. I haven't the faintest notion what a Hook can be in connection with the Thames. It may be a mountain or a glacier, for anything I know to the contrary; but I am assured it is delightful. Please let me know nothing more, dearest aunt, till I go there with Malcolm. It is adorable of you to hit upon such a splendid idea. And it will look very well in the society papers," added Pamela, waxing business-like. "'Mr. and Mrs. Malcolm Stuart!' (O, how queer that sounds!) 'are to spend their honeymoon at The Hook, the riverside residence of the bride's aunt.' I wonder whether they will say 'the well-known residence'?" mused Pamela.

Mildred went up to town with Miss Ransome and her betrothed at the end of the young lady's visit. Miss Fausset had been coldly gracious, after her manner, had allowed Mr. Stuart to come to her

house whenever he pleased, and had given up the rarely-used front drawing-room to the lovers, who sat and whispered and tittered over their own little witticisms, by the distant piano, and behaved altogether like those proverbial children of whom we are told in our childhood, who are seen but not heard. Mildred lunched in Grosvenor Gardens, and went to Chertsey by an afternoon train. The housekeeper who had once ruled over both Mr. Fausset's houses, subject to interference from Bell, was now caretaker at The Hook, with a housemaid under her. She was an elderly woman, but considerably Bell's junior, and she was an admirable cook and manager. A telegram two days before had told her to expect her mistress, and the house was in perfect order when Mrs. Greswold arrived in the summer twilight. All things had been made to look as if the place were in family occupation, though no one but the two servants had been living there since Mr. Fausset's death. The familiar aspect of the rooms smote Mildred with a sudden unexpected pain. There were the old lamps burning on the tables, the well-remembered vases—her mother's

choice, and always artistic in form and colour—filled with the old June flowers from garden and hothouse. Her father's chair stood in its old place in the bay-window in front of the table at which he used to write his letters sometimes, looking out at the river between whiles. Mrs. Dawson had put a lamp in his study, a small room opening out of the drawing-room, and with windows on two sides, and both looking towards the river, which he had loved so well. The windows were open in the twilight, and the rose-garden was like a sea of bloom.

In her father's room nothing was altered. As it had been in the last days he had lived there, so it was now.

"I haven't moved so much as a penholder, ma'am," said Dawson tearfully.

CHAPTER IX.

LITERA SCRIPTA MANET.

The house and grounds were in such perfect order that there was very little to be done in the way of preparation for the honeymoon visitors. Even the pianos had been periodically tuned, and the clocks had been regularly wound. Two or three servants would have to be engaged for the period, and that was all; and even this want Mrs. Dawson proposed to supply without going off the premises.

The housemaid had a sister, who was an accomplished parlourmaid and carver; the under-gardener's eldest daughter was pining for a preliminary canter in the kitchen, and the gardener's wife was a retired cook, and would be delighted to take all the rougher part of the cooking, while Mrs. Dawson devoted her art to those pretty tiny kickshaws in which she excelled. There were peaches ripening in the peach-house, and the apricots were going to

be a show. There was wine in the cellar that would have satisfied an alderman on his honeymoon. Mildred's business at The Hook might have been completed in a day, yet she lingered there for week, and still lingered on, loving the place with a love which was mingled with pain, yet happier there than she could have been anywhere else in the world, she thought.

The chief gardener rowed her about the river, never going very far from home, but meandering about the summer stream, by flowery meadows, and reedy eyots, and sometimes diverging into a tributary stream, where the shallow water seemed only an excuse for wild flowers. He had rowed her up and down those same streams when she was a child with streaming hair and he was the under-gardener. He had rowed her about in that brief summer season when Fay was her companion.

She revisited all those spots in which she had wandered with her lover. She would land here or there along the island, and as she remembered each particular object in the landscape, her feet seemed to grow light again, with the lightness of joyous

youth, as they touched the familiar shore. It was almost as if her youth came back to her.

Thus it was that she lingered from day to day, loth to leave the beloved place. She wrote frankly to her aunt, saying how much good the change of air and scene had done her, and promising to return to Brighton in a few days. She felt that it was her duty to resume her place beside that fading existence; and yet it was an infinite relief to her to escape from that dull gray house, and the dull gray life. She acknowledged to herself that her aunt's life was a good life, full of unselfish work and large charity, and yet there was something that repelled her, even while she admired. It was too much like a life lived up to a certain model, adjusted line by line to a carefully-studied plan. There was a lack of spontaneity, a sense of perpetual effort. The benevolence which had made Enderby village like one family in the sweet time that was gone had been of a very different character. There had been the warmth of love and sympathy in every kindness of George Greswold's, and there had been infinite pity for wrong-doers. Miss Fausset's almsgiving was

after the fashion of the Pharisee of old, and it was upon the amount given that she held herself justified before God, not upon the manner of giving.

In those quiet days, spent alone in her old home, Mildred had chosen to occupy Mr. Fausset's study rather than the large bright drawing-room. The smaller room was more completely associated with her father. It was here—seated in the chair before the writing-table, where she was sitting now—that he had first talked to her of George Greswold, and had discussed her future life, questioning his motherless girl with more than a father's tenderness about the promptings of her own heart. She loved the room and all that it contained for the sake of the cherished hands that had touched these things, and the gentle life that had been lived here. There had been but one error in his life, she thought—his treatment of Fay.

"He ought not to have sent her away," she thought; "he saw us happy together, his two daughters, and he ought not to have divided us, and sent her away to a loveless life among strangers.

If he had only been frank and straightforward with my mother she might have forgiven all."

Might, perhaps. Mildred was not sure upon that point; but she felt very sure that it was her father's duty to have braved all consequences rather than to have sent his unacknowledged child into exile. That fact of not acknowledging her seemed in itself such a tremendous cruelty that it intensified every lesser wrong.

Mrs. Dawson understood her mistress's fancy for her father's room, and Mildred's meals were served here, at a Sutherland-table in the bay-window, from which she could see the boats go by, Mrs. Dawson having a profound belief in the efficacy of the boats as a cure for low spirits.

"People sometimes tell me it must be dull at The Hook," she said; "but, lor! they don't know how many boats go by in summer-time. It's almost as gay as Bond Street."

Mildred lived alone with old memories in the flower-scented room, where the Spanish blinds made a cool and shadowy atmosphere, while the roses outside were steeped in sunshine. Those few days

were just the most perfect summer days of the year. She felt sorry that they had not been reserved for Pamela's honeymoon. Such sunshine was almost wasted on her, whose heart was so full of sadness.

It was her last afternoon at The Hook, or the afternoon which she meant to be her last, having made up her mind to go back to Brighton and duty on the following day, and she had a task before her, a task which she had delayed from day to day, just as she had delayed her return to her aunt.

She had to put away those special and particular objects which had belonged to her father and mother, and had been a part of their lives. These were too sacred to be left about now that strangers were to occupy the rooms of the dead. Hitherto no stranger had entered those rooms since John Fausset's death, nothing had been removed or altered. No documents relating to property or business of any kind had been kept at The Hook. Mr. Fausset's affairs had all been put in perfect order after his wife's death, and there had been no ransacking for missing title-deeds or papers of any kind. It had been understood that all papers and letters of importance

were either with Mr. Fausset's solicitors or at the house in Parchment Street, and thus the household gods had been undisturbed in the summer retreat by the river.

Mildred had spent the morning in her mother's rooms, putting away all those dainty trifles and prettinesses which had gathered round the frivolous, luxurious life, as shells and bright-coloured weeds gather among the low rocks on the edge of the sea. She had placed everything carefully in a large closet in her mother's dressing-room, covered with much tissue-paper, secure from dust and moth; and now she began the same kind of work in her father's room, the work of removing all those objects which had been especially his: the old-fashioned silver inkstand, the well-worn scarlet morocco blotting-book, with his crest on the cover, and many ink-spots on the leather lining inside, his penholders and penknives, and a little velvet pen-wiper which she had made for him when she was ten years old, and which he had kept on his table ever afterwards.

She looked round the room thoughtfully for a place of security for these treasures. She had spent

a good deal of time in rearranging her father's books, which careful and conscientious dusting had reduced to a chaotic condition Now every volume was in its place, just as *he* had kept them in the old days when it had been her delight to examine the shelves and to carry away a book of her father's choosing.

The bookcases were by Chippendale, with fret-work cornices and mahogany panelling. The lower part was devoted to cupboards, which her father had always kept under lock and key, but which she supposed to contain only old magazines, pamphlets, and newspapers, part of that vast mass of literature which is kept with a view to being looked at some day, and which finally drifts unread to the bourne of all waste paper, and is ground into pulp again, and rolls over the endless web again, and comes back upon the world printed with more intellectual food for the million of skippers and skimmers.

Yes, one of those mahogany panelled cupboards would serve Mildred's purpose admirably. She selected a key from one of the bunches in her key-box, and opened the cupboard nearest the door.

It was packed tight with *Army Lists*, *New Monthly Magazines*, and *Edinburgh Reviews*—packed so well that there was scarcely an interstice that would hold a pin. She opened the next cupboard. *Sporting Magazine*, *Blackwood*, *Ainsworth*, and a pile of pamphlets. No room there.

She opened the third, and found it much more loosely packed, with odd newspapers, and old Prayer Books and Bibles: shabby, old-fashioned books, which had served for the religious exercises of several generations of Faussets, and had been piously preserved by the owner of The Hook. There was room here perhaps for the things in the writing-table, if all these books and papers were rearranged and closely packed.

Mildred began her work patiently. She was in no hurry to have done with her task; it brought her nearer to her beloved dead. She worked slowly, dreamily almost, her thoughts dwelling on the days that were gone.

She took out the Prayer Books and Bibles one by one, looking at a fly-leaf now and then. John Fausset, from his loving mother, on the day of his

confirmation, June 17, 1835; Lucy Jane Fausset, with her sister Maria's love, April 3, 1804; Mark Fausset, in memory of little Charlie, December 1, 1807. Such inscriptions as these touched her, with their reminiscences of vanished affection, of hearts long mingled with the dust.

She put the books on one side in a little pile on the carpet, as she knelt before the open cupboard, and then she began to move the loose litter of newspapers. The *Morning Herald*, the *Morning Chronicle*, the *Sun*. Even *these* were of the dead.

The cupboard held much more than she had expected. Behind the newspapers there were two rows of pigeons-holes, twenty-six in all, filled—choke-full, some of them—with letters, folded long-wise, in a thoroughly business-like manner.

Old letters, old histories of the family heart and mind, how much they hold to stir the chords of love and pain! Mildred's hand trembled as she stretched it out to take one of those letters, idly, full of morbid curiosity about those relics of a past life.

She never knew whether it had been deliberation or hazard which guided her hand to the sixth pigeon-

hole, but she thought afterwards that her eye must have been caught by a bit of red ribbon—a spot of bright colour—and that her hand followed her eye mechanically. However this may have been, the first thing that she took from the mass of divers correspondence in the twenty-six pigeon-holes was a packet of about twenty letters tied with a red ribbon.

Each letter was carefully indorsed "M. F." and a date. Some were on foreign paper, others on thick gilt-edged note. A glance at the uppermost letter showed her a familiar handwriting—her aunt's, but very different from Miss Fausset's present precise penmanship. The writing here was more hurried and irregular, bolder, larger, and more indicative of impulse and emotion.

No thought of possible wrong to her aunt entered Mildred's mind as she untied the ribbon and seated herself in a low chair in front of the bookcase, with the letters loose in her lap. What secrets could there be in a girl's letters to her elder brother which the brother's daughter might not read, nearly forty years after they were written? What could there

be in that yellow paper, in that faded ink, except the pale dim ghosts of vanished fancies, and thoughts which the thinker had long outlived?

"I wonder whether my aunt would care to read these old letters?" mused Mildred. "It would be like calling up her own ghost. She must have almost forgotten what she was like when she wrote them."

The first letter was from Milan, full of enthusiasm about the Cathedral and the Conservatoire, full of schemes for work. She was practising six hours a day, and taking nine lessons a week—four for piano, two for singing, three for harmony. She was in high spirits, and delighted with her life.

"I should practise eight hours a day if Mrs. Holmby would let me," she wrote, "but she won't. She says it would be too much for my health. I believe it is only because my piano annoys her. I get up at five on these summer mornings, and practise from six to half-past eight; then coffee and rolls, and off to the Conservatoire; then a drive with Mrs. Holmby, who is too lazy to walk much; and then lunch. After lunch vespers at the Cathedral,

and then two hours at the piano before dinner. An hour and a half between dinner and tea, which we take at nine. Sometimes one of Mrs. Holmby's friends drops in to tea. You needn't be afraid: the men are all elderly, and not particularly clean. They take snuff, and their complexions are like mahogany; but there is one old man, with bristly gray hair standing out all over his head like a brush, who plays the 'cello divinely, and who reminds me of Beethoven. I am learning the 'Sonate Pathétique,' and I play Bach's preludes and fugues two hours a day. We went to La Scala the night before last; but I was disappointed to find they were playing a trumpery modern opera by a Milanese composer, who is all the rage here."

Two or three letters followed, all in the same strain, and then came signs of discontent.

"I have no doubt Mrs. Holmby is a highly respectable person, and I am sure you acted for the best when you chose her for my chaperon, but she is a lump of prejudice. She objects to the Cathedral. 'We are fully justified in making ourselves familiar with its architectural beauties,' she said, in her

pedantic way, 'but to attend the services of that benighted church is to worship in the groves of Baal.' I told her that I had found neither groves nor idols in that magnificent church, and that the music I heard there was the only pleasure which reconciled me to the utter dulness of my life at Milan —I was going to say my life with her, but thought it better to be polite, as I am quite in her power till you come to fetch me.

"Don't think that I am tired of the Conservatoire, after teasing you so to let me come here, or even that I am home-sick. I am only tired of Mrs. Holmby; and I daresay, after all, she is no worse than any other chaperon would be. As for the Conservatoire, I adore it, and I feel that I am making rapid strides in my musical education. My master is pleased with my playing of the 'Pathétique,' and I am to take the 'Eroica' next. What a privilege it is to know Beethoven! He seems to me now like a familiar friend. I have been reading a memoir of him. What a sad life—what a glorious legacy he leaves the world which treated him so badly!

"I play Diabelli's exercises for an hour and a

half every morning, before I look at any other music."

In the next letter Mildred started at the appearance of a familiar name.

"Your kind suggestion about the Opera House has been followed, and we have taken seats at La Scala for two nights a week. Signor Castellani's opera is really very charming. I have heard it now three times, and liked it better each time. There is not much learning in the orchestration; but there is a great deal of melody all through the opera. The Milanese are mad about it. Signor Castellani came to see Mrs. Holmby one evening last week, introduced by our gray-haired 'cello-player. He is a clever-looking man, about five-and-thirty, with a rather melancholy air. He writes his librettos, and is something of a poet.

"We have made a compromise about the Cathedral. I am to go to vespers if I like, as my theological opinions are not in Mrs. Holmby's keeping. She will walk with me to the Cathedral, leave me at the bottom of the steps, do her shopping or take a gentle walk, and return for me when the

service is over. It only lasts three-quarters of an hour, and Mrs. Holmby always has shopping of some kind on her hands, as she does all her own marketing, and buys everything in the smallest quantities. I suppose by this means she makes more out of your handsome allowance for my board—or fancies she does."

There were more letters in the same strain, and Castellani's name appeared often in relation to his operas; but there was no further mention of social intercourse. The letters grew somewhat fretful in tone, and there were repeated complaints of Mrs. Holmby. There were indications of fitful spirits—now enthusiasm, now depression.

"I have at least discovered that I am no genius," she wrote. "When I attempt to improvise, the poverty of my ideas freezes me; and yet music with me is a passion. Those vesper services in the Cathedral are my only consolation in this great dull town.

"No, dear Jack, I am not home-sick. I have to finish my musical education. I am tired of nothing, except Mrs. Holmby."

After this there was an interval. The next letter was dated six months later. It was on a different kind of paper, and it was written from Evian, on the Lake of Geneva. Even the character of the penmanship had altered. It had lost its girlish dash, and something of its firmness. The strokes were heavier, but yet bore traces of hesitation. It was altogether a feebler style of writing.

The letter began abruptly :

" I know that you have been kind to me, John—kinder, more merciful than many brothers would have been under the same miserable circumstances ; but nothing you can do can make me anything else than what I have made myself—the most wretched of creatures. When I walk about in this quiet place, alone, and see the beggars holding out their hands to me, maimed, blind, dumb perhaps, the very refuse of humanity, I feel that their misery is less than mine. *They* were not brought up to think highly of themselves, and to look down upon other people, as I was. *They* were never petted and admired as I was. They were not brought up to

think honour the one thing that makes life worth living—to feel the sting of shame worse than the sting of death. They fall into raptures if I give them a franc—and all the wealth of the world would not give me one hour of happiness. You tell me to forget my misery. Forget—now! No, I have no wish to leave this place. I should be neither better nor happier anywhere else. It is very quiet here. There are no visitors left now in the neighbourhood. There is no one to wonder who I am, or why I am living alone here in my tiny villa. The days go by like a long weary dream, and there are days when the gray lake and the gray mountains are half hidden in mist, and when all Nature seems of the same colour as my own life.

"I received the books you kindly chose for me, a large parcel. There is a novel among them which tells almost my own story. It made me shed tears for the first time since you left me at Lausanne. Some people say they find a relief in tears, but my tears are not of that kind. I was ill for nearly a week after reading that story. Please don't send me any more novels. If they are about happy people they

irritate me ; if they are sorrowful stories they make me just a shade more wretched than I am always. If you send me books again let them be the hardest kind of reading you can get. I hear there is a good book on natural history by a man called Darwin. I should like to read that.—Gratefully and affectionately your sister, M. F."

This letter was dated October. The next was written in November from the same address.

"No, my dear John, your fears were unfounded, I have not been ill. I wish I had been—sick unto death ! I have been too wretched to write, that was all. Why should I distress you with a reiteration of my misery—and I *cannot* write, or think about anything else ? I have no doubt Darwin's book is good, but I could not interest myself in it. The thought of my own misery comes between me and every page I read.

"You ask me what I mean to do with my life when my dark days are over. To that question there can but be one answer. I mean, so far as it is possible, to forget. I shall go down to my grave burdened with my dismal secret; but I shall exercise

every faculty I possess to keep that secret to the end. *He* is not likely to betray me. The knowledge of his own baseness will seal his lips.

"Your suggestion of a future home in some quiet village, either in England or abroad, is kindly meant, I know, but I shudder at the mere idea of such a life. To pass as a widow; to have to answer every prying acquaintance—the doctor, the clergyman—people who would force themselves upon me, however secluded my life might be; to devote myself to a duty which in every hour of my existence would remind me of my folly and of my degradation: I should live like the galley-slave who drags his chain at every step.

"You tell me that the tie which would be a sorrow in the beginning might grow into a blessing. That could never be. You know very little of a woman's nature when you suggest such a possibility. What *can* your sex know of a woman's agony under such circumstances as mine? *You* are never made to feel the sting of dishonour."

A light began to dawn on Mildred as she read this second letter from Evian. The first might mean

anything—an engagement broken off, a proud girl jilted by a worthless lover, the sense of degradation that a woman feels in having loved unwisely—in having wasted confidence and affection upon an unworthy object: Mildred had so interpreted that despairing letter. But the second revealed a deeper wound, a darker misery.

There were sentences that stood out from the context with unmistakable meaning. "When my dark days are over"—"to pass as a widow"—"to devote myself to a duty which would remind me of my folly and my degradation."

That suggestion of a secluded life—of a care which should grow into a blessing—could mean only one thing. The wretched girl who wrote that letter was about to become a mother, under conditions which meant life-long dishonour.

White as marble, and with hands that trembled convulsively as they held the letter, Mildred Greswold read on, hurriedly, eagerly, breathlessly, to the last line of the last letter. She had no scruples, no sense of wrong-doing. The secret hidden in that little packet of letters was a secret which she had a

right to know—she above all other people, she who had been cheated and fooled by false imaginings.

The third letter from Evian was dated late in January:

"I have been very ill—dangerously, I believe—but my doctor took unnecessary trouble to cure me. I am now able to go out of doors again, and I walk by the lake for half-an-hour every day in the morning sun. The child thrives wonderfully, I am told; but if there is to be a change of nurses, as there must be—for this woman here must lose sight of her charge and of me when I leave this place—the change cannot be made too soon. If Boulogne is really the best place you can think of, your plan would be to meet me with the nurse at Dijon, where we can take the rail. We shall post from here to that town. I am very sorry to inflict so much trouble upon you, but it is a part of my misery to be a burden to you as well as to myself. When once this incubus is safely disposed of, I shall be less troublesome to you.

"No, my dear John, there is no relenting, no awakening of maternal love. For me that must

remain for ever a meaningless phrase. For me there can be nothing now or ever more, except a sense of aversion and horror—a shrinking from the very image of the child that must never call me mother, or know the link between us. All that can possibly be done to sever that link I shall do; and I entreat you, by the love of past years, to help me in so doing. My only chance of peace in the future is in total severance. Remember that I am prepared to make any sacrifice that can secure the happiness of this wretched being, that can make up to her—"

"That can make up to *her!*"

Mildred's clutch tightened upon the letter. This was the first mention of the infant's sex.

"—For the dishonour to which she is born. I will gladly devote half my fortune to her maintenance and her future establishment in life, if she should grow up and marry. Remember also that I have sworn to myself never to entertain any proposal of marriage, never to listen to words of love from any man upon earth. You need have no fear of future embarrassment on my account. I shall never give a man the right to interrogate my past life. I resign

myself to a solitary existence—but not to a life clouded with shame. When I go back to England and resume my place in society, I shall try to think of this last year of agony as if it were a bad dream. You alone know my secret, and you can help me if you will. My prayer is that from the hour I see the child transferred to the new nurse at Dijon, I shall never look upon its face again. The nurse can go back to her home as fast as the train will carry her, and I can go back to London with you."

The next letter was written seven years later, and addressed from Kensington Gore:

"I suppose I ought to answer your long letter by saying that I am glad the child has good health, that I rejoice in her welfare, and so on. But I cannot be such a hypocrite. It hurts me to write about her; it hurts me to think of her. My heart hardens itself against her at every suggestion of her quickness, or her prettiness, or any other merit. To me she can be nothing except—disgrace. I burnt your letter the instant it was read. I felt as if some one was looking over my shoulder as I read it. I dared not go down to lunch for fear Mrs.

Winstanley's searching eyes should read my secret in my face. I pretended a headache, and stayed in my room till our eight-o'clock dinner, when I knew I should be safe in the dim religious light which my chaperon affects as the most flattering to wrinkles and pearl-powder.

"But I am not ungrateful, my dear John. I am touched even by your kindly interest in that unfortunate waif. I have no doubt you have done wisely in placing her with the good old lady at Barnes, and that she is very happy running about the Common. I am glad I know where she is, so that I may never drive that way, if I can possibly help it. Your old lady must be rather a foolish woman, I should think, to change Fanny into Fay, on the strength of the child's airy movements and elfin appearance; but as long as this person knows nothing of her charge's history her silliness cannot matter."

A letter of a later date was addressed from Lewes Crescent.

"I am horrified at what you have done. O, John, how could you be so reckless, so forgetful of

my reiterated entreaties to keep that girl's existence wide apart from mine or yours? And you have actually introduced her into your own house as a relation; and you actually allow her to be called by your name! Was ever such madness? You stultify all that has been done in the past. You open the door to questionings and conjectures of the most dreadful kind. No, I will not see her. You must be mad to suggest such a thing. My feeling about her to-day is exactly the same as my feeling on the day she was born—disgust, horror, dread. I will never—willingly—look upon her face.

"Do you remember those words in *Bleak House?* 'Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers.' So it is with that girl and me. Can love be possible where there is this mutual disgrace?

"For God's sake, get the girl out of your house as soon as you can! Send her to some good school abroad—France, Germany, where you like, and save me from the possibility of discovery. My secret has been kept—my friends look up to me. I have outlived the worst part of my misery, and have learnt

to take some interest in life. I could not survive the discovery of my wretched story."

A later letter was briefer and more business-like.

"I fully concur in the settlement you propose, and would as willingly make the sum 40,000*l.* as 30,000*l.* Remember that, so far as money can go, I am anxious to do the *uttermost.* I hope she will marry soon, and marry well, and that she may lead a happy and honourable life under a new name—a name that she can bear without a blush. I should be much relieved if she could continue to live abroad."

This was the last letter in the bundle tied with red ribbon. In the same pigeon-hole Mildred found the draft of a deed of gift, transferring 30,000*l.* India Stock to Fanny Fausset, otherwise Vivien Faux, on her twenty-first birthday, and with the draft there were several letters from a firm of solicitors in Lincoln's Inn Fields relating to the same deed of gift.

The last of the letters fell from Mildred's lap as she sat with her hands clasped before her face, dazed by this sudden light which altered the aspect of her life.

"Fool, fool, fool!" she cried.

The thought of all she had suffered, and of the suffering she had inflicted on the man she loved, almost maddened her. She had condemned her father—her generous, noble-hearted father—upon evidence that had seemed to her incontrovertible. She had believed in a stain upon that honourable life—had believed him a sinner and a coward. And Miss Fausset knew all that she had forfeited by that fatal misapprehension, and yet kept her shameful secret, caring for her own reputation more than for two blighted lives.

She remembered how she had appealed to her aunt to solve the mystery of Fay's parentage, and how deliberately Miss Fausset had declared her ignorance. She had advised her niece to go back to her husband, but that was all.

Mildred gathered the letters together, tied them with the faded ribbon, and then went to her father's writing-table and wrote these lines, in a hand that trembled with indignation:

"I know all the enclosed letters can tell me. You have kept your secret at the hazard of breaking

two hearts. I know not if the wrong you have done me can ever be set right; but this I know, that I shall never again enter your house, or look upon your face, if I can help it. I am going back to my husband, never again to leave him, if he will let me stay. MILDRED GRESWOLD."

She packed the letters securely in one of the large banker's envelopes out of her father's desk. She sealed the packet with her father's crest, intending to register and post it with her own hands on her way to Romsey; and then, with a heart that beat with almost suffocating force, she consulted the time-table, and tried to match trains between Reading and Basingstoke.

There was a train from Chertsey to Reading at five. She might catch that and be home—home—home—how the word thrilled her! some time before midnight. She would have gone back if it had been to arrive in the dead of night.

CHAPTER X.

MARKED BY FATE.

It was nearly ten o'clock when Mildred drove through the village of Enderby, and saw the lights burning in the familiar cottage windows, the post-office, and the little fancy shop where Lola had been so constant a purchaser in the days gone by. Her eyes were full of tears as she looked at the humble street: happy tears, for her heart thrilled with hope as she drew near home.

"He cannot withhold his forgiveness," she told herself. "He knows that I acted for conscience' sake."

Five minutes more and she was standing in the hall, questioning the footman, who stared at her with a bewildered air, as the most unexpected of visitors.

"Is your master at home?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am, master's in the library. Shall I announce you?"

"No, no—I can find him. Help my maid to take my things to my room."

"Yes, ma'am. Have you dined, or shall I tell cook to get something ready?"

"No, no. I have dined," she answered hurriedly, and went on to the library, to that very room in which she had made the fatal discovery of Fay's identity with her husband's first wife.

He was sittting in the lamp-light, just as he was sitting that night when she fell fainting at his feet. The windows were open to the summer night, books were scattered about on the table, and heaped on the floor by his side. Whatever comfort there may be in such company, he had surrounded himself with that comfort. He took no notice of the opening of the door, and she was kneeling at his feet before he knew that she was in the room.

"Mildred, what does this mean? Have we not parted often enough?"

"There was no reason for our parting—except my mistaken belief. I am here to stay with you till my death, if you will have me, George. Be merciful to me, my dearest! I have acted for

conscience' sake. I have been fooled, deluded by appearances which might have deceived any one, however wise. Forgive me, George ; forgive me for the sake of all I have suffered in doing what I thought to be my duty !"

He lifted her from her knees, took her to his heart without a word, and kissed her. There was a silence of some moments, in which each could hear the throbbing of the other's heart.

"You were wrong after all, then," he said at last; "Vivien was not your half-sister ?"

"She was not."

"Whose child was she ?"

"You must not ask me that, George. It is a secret which I ought not to tell even to you. She was cruelly used, poor girl, more cruelly even than I thought she had been when I believed she was my father's daughter. I have undeniable evidence as to her parentage. She was my blood-relation, but she was not my sister."

"How did you make the discovery ?"

"By accident—this afternoon at The Hook. I found some papers and letters of my father's in a

cupboard below the bookcase. I knew nothing of their existence — should never have thought of searching for private papers there, for I had heard my father often say that he kept only magazines and pamphlets—things he called rubbish—in those cupboards. I wanted to put away some things, and I stumbled on a packet of letters which revealed the secret of Fay's birth. I can come back to my duty with a clear conscience. May I stay with you, George?"

"May you? Well, yes; I suppose so," with another kiss and a tender little laugh. "One cannot make a broken vase new again, but we may pick up the pieces and stick them together again somehow. You have taken a good many years out of my life, Mildred, and I doubt if you can give them back to me. I feel twenty years older than I felt before the beginning of this trouble; but now all is known, and you are my wife again—well, there may be a few years of gladness for us yet. We will make the most of them."

All things dropped back into the old grooves at

Enderby Manor. Mrs. Greswold and her husband were seen together at church on the Sunday morning after Mildred's return, much to the astonishment of the congregation, who immediately began to disbelieve in all their own convictions and assertions of the past half-year, and to opine that the lady had only been in the South for her health, more especially as it was known that Miss Ransome had been her travelling companion.

"If she had quarrelled with her husband, she would hardly have had her husband's niece with her all the time," said Mrs. Porter, the doctor's wife.

"But if there was no quarrel, why did he shut himself up like a hermit, and look so wretched if one happened to meet him?" asked somebody else.

"Well, there she is, anyhow, and she looks out of health, so you may depend some London physician ordered her abroad. They might as well have consulted Porter, who ought to know her constitution by this time. He'd have ordered her to Ventnor for the winter, and saved them both a good deal of trouble; but there, people never think they can be cured without going to Cavendish Square."

Mildred's strength seemed to fail her more in the happiness of that unhoped-for reunion than it had ever done during her banishment. She wanted to do so much at Enderby : to visit about among her shabby-genteel old ladies and her cottagers as in the cloudless time before Lola's death ; to superintend her garden ; to visit old friends whose faces were endeared by fond association with the past; to be everywhere with her husband: walking with him in the copses, riding about the farms, and on the edge of the forest, in the dewy summer mornings. She wanted to do all these things, and she found that her strength would not let her.

" I hope that my health is not going to give way, just when I am so happy," she said to her husband one day, when she felt almost fainting after their morning ride.

He took alarm instantly, and sent off for Mr. Porter, though Mildred made light of her feelings next moment. The family practitioner sounded her with the usual professional gravity, but his face grew more serious as he listened to the beating of her heart. He affected, however, to think very little of

her ailments, talked of nerves, and suggested bromide of something, as if it were infallible; but when George Greswold went out into the hall with him he owned that all was not right.

"The heart is weak," he said. "I hope there may be no organic mischief, but—"

"You mean that I shall lose her," interrupted Greswold, in a husky whisper.

His own heart was beating like the tolling of a church bell—beating with the dull, heavy stroke of despair.

"No, no. I don't think there's any immediate danger, but I should like you to take higher advice —Clark or Jenner, perhaps."

"Of course. I will send for some one at once."

"The very thing to alarm her. She ought to be kept free from all possible anxiety or excitement. Don't let her ride—except in the quietest way—or walk far enough to fatigue herself. You might take her up to town for a few days on the pretence of seeing picture-galleries or something, and then coax her to consult a physician, just for *your* satisfaction. Make as light as you can of her complaint."

"Yes, yes. I understand. O, God, that it should be so, after all; when I thought I had come to the end of sorrow!" This in an undertone. "For pity's sake, Porter, tell me the worst! You think it a bad case?"

Porter shook his head, tried to speak, grasped George Greswold's hand, and made for the door. Mr. and Mrs. Greswold had been his patients and friends for the last fifteen years, and in his rough way he was devoted to them.

"See Jenner as soon as you can," he said. "It is a very delicate case. I would rather not hazard an opinion."

George Greswold went out to the lawn where he had sat on the Sunday evening before Lola's death. It had been summer then, and it was summer now—the time of roses, before the song of the nightingale had ceased amidst the seclusion of twilit branches. He sat down upon the bench under the cedar, and gave himself up to his despair. He had tasted again the sweet cup of domestic peace—he had been gladdened again by the only companionship that had ever filled his heart, and now in the near future he

saw the prospect of another parting, and this time without hope on earth. Once again he told himself that he was marked out by Fate.

"I suppose it must always be so," he thought; "in the lots that fall from the urn there must be some that are all of one colour—black—black as night."

Mildred came out to the lawn with him, followed by Kassandra, who had deserted the master for the mistress since her return, as if in a delight mixed with fear lest she should again depart.

"What has become of you, George? I thought you were coming back to the morning-room directly, and it is nearly an hour since Mr. Porter went away."

"I came into the garden—to—to see your new shrubbery."

"Did you really? how good of you! It is hardly to be called a new shrubbery—only a little addition to the old one. It will give an idea of distance when the shrubs are good enough to grow tall and thick. Will you come with me and tell me what you think of it?"

"Gladly, dear, if it will not tire you."

"Tire me to walk to the shubbery! No, I am not quite so bad as that, though I find I am a bad walker compared with what I used to be. I daresay I am out of training. I could walk any distance at Brighton last autumn. A long walk on the road to Rottingdean was my only distraction; but at Pallanza I began to flag, and the hotel people were always suggesting drives, so I got out of the habit of walking."

He had his hand through her arm, and drew her near him as they sauntered across the lawn, with a hopeless wonder at the thought that she was here at his side, close to his heart, all in all to him to-day, and that the time might soon come when she would have melted out of his life as that fair daughter had done, when the grave under the tree should mean a double desolation, an everlasting despair.

"Is there *any* world where we shall be together again?" he asked himself. "What is immortality worth to me if it does not mean reunion? To go round upon the endless wheel of eternity, to be fixed into the universal life, to be a part of the Creator

Himself! Nothing in a life to come can be gain to me if it do not give me back what I have lost."

They dawdled about the shrubbery, man and wife, arm linked with arm, looking at the new plantings one by one; she speculating how many years each tree would take to come to perfection.

"They will make a very good effect in three or four years, George. Don't you think so? That *Picea nobilis* will fill the open space yonder. We have allowed ten feet clear on every side. The golden brooms grow only too quickly. How serious you look! Are you thinking of anything that makes you anxious?"

"I am thinking of Pamela and her sweetheart. I should like to make Lady Lochinvar's acquaintance before the marriage."

"Shall I ask her here?"

"She could hardly come, I fancy, while the wedding is on the *tapis*. I propose that you and I should go up to London to-morrow, put up at our old hotel—we shall be more independent there than at Grosvenor Gardens—and spend a few days quietly, seeing a good deal of the picture-galleries, and a little

of our new connections—and of Rosalind and her husband, whom we don't often see. Would you like to do that, Mildred?"

"I like anything you like. I delight in seeing pictures with you, and I shall be glad to see Rosalind; and if Pamela really wishes us to be present at her wedding, I think we ought to be there, don't you, George?"

"If you would like it dearest; if—"

He left the sentence unfinished, fearing to betray his apprehension. Till he had consulted the highest authorities in the land he felt that he could know but little of that hidden malady which paled her cheek and gave heaviness to the pathetic eyes.

They were in Cavendish Square, husband and wife, on the morning after their arrival in town, by special appointment with the physician. Mildred submitted meekly to a careful consultation—only for his own satisfaction, her husband told her, making light of his anxiety.

"I want you to be governed by the best possible advice, dearest, in the care of your health."

"You don't think there is danger, George; that I am to be taken away from you, just when all our secrets and sorrows are over?"

"Indeed, no, dearest! God grant you may be spared to me for many happy years to come!"

"There is no reason, I think, that it should not be so. Mr. Porter said my complaint was chiefly nervous. He would not wonder at my nerves being in a poor way if he knew how I suffered in those bitter days of banishment."

The examination was long and serious, yet conducted by the physician with such gentle *bonhomie* as not to alarm the patient. When it was over, he dismissed her with a kindly smile, after advice given upon very broad lines.

"After the question of diet, which I have written for you here," he said, handing her half a sheet of paper, "the only other treatment I can counsel is self-indulgence. Never walk far enough to feel tired, or fast enough to be out of breath. Live as much as possible in the open air, but let your life out of doors be the sweet idleness of the sunny South, rather than our ideal bustling, hurrying British

existence. Court repose—tranquillity for body and mind in all things."

"You mean that I am to be an invalid for the rest of my life, as my poor mother was for five years before her death?"

"At what age did your mother die?"

"Thirty-four. For a long time the doctors would hardly say what was the matter with her. She suffered terribly from palpitation of the heart, as I have done for the last six months; but the doctors made light of it, and told my father there was very little amiss. Towards the end they changed their opinion, and owned that there was organic disease. Nothing they could do for her seemed of much use."

Mildred went back to the waiting-room while her husband had an interview with the doctor; an interview which left him but the faintest hope—only the hope of prolonging a fading life.

"She may last for years, perhaps," said the physician, pitying the husband's silent agony, "but it would be idle to disguise her state. She will never be strong again. She must not ride, or drive,

or occupy herself in any way that can involve violent exertion, or a shock to the nerves. Cherish her as a hothouse flower, and she may be with you for some time yet."

"God bless you, even for that hope," said Greswold, and then he spoke of his niece's wedding, and the wish for Mildred's presence.

"No harm in a wedding, I think, if you are careful of her: no over-exertion, no agitating scenes. The wedding may cheer her, and prevent her brooding on her own state. Good-day. I shall be glad to know the effect of my prescription, and to see Mrs. Greswold again in a month or two, if she is strong enough to come to London. If you want me at any time in the country—"

"You will come, will you not? Remember she is all that is precious to me upon this earth. If I lose her I lose everything."

"Send for me at any time. If it is possible for me to go to you I will go."

CHAPTER XI.

LIKE A TALE THAT IS TOLD.

Pamela's wedding was one of the most successful functions of the London season; and the society papers described the ceremony with a fulness of detail which satisfied even the bride's avidity for social fame. Mr. Smithson sent her gown just an hour before it had to make its reverence before the altar in the Abbey; and Pamela, who had been in an almost hysterical agony for an hour-and-a-half, lest she should have no gown in which to be married, owned, as she pirouetted before the cheval-glass, that the fit was worth the suspense.

The ladies who write fashion articles in the two social arbiters were rapturous about Mr. Smithson's *chef-d'œuvre,* and gave glowing accounts of certain trousseau gowns which they had been privileged to review at an afternoon tea in Grosvenor Gardens a week before the event. Pamela's delight in these

paragraphs was intensified by the idea that César Castellani would read them, though it is hardly likely that listless skimmer of modern literature went so deep as fashion articles.

"He will see at least that if he had married me he would not have married quite a nobody," said Pamela, in a summer reverie upon the blue water in front of The Hook, where she and her husband dawdled about in a punt nearly all day, expatiating upon each other's merits. And so floats this light bark gaily into a safe and placid haven, out of reach of privateer or pirate such as the incomparable Castellani.

It was not until after Pamela's wedding, and nearly a month after Mildred's discovery of the letters in the bookcase, that Miss Fausset made any sign; but one August morning her reply came in the shape of a letter, entreating Mildred to go to her, as an act of charity to one whose sands had nearly run out.

"I will not sue to you *in formâ pauperis*," she wrote, "so I do not pretend that I am a dying

woman; but I believe I have not very long to live, and before my voice is mute upon earth I want to tell you the history of one year of my girlhood. I want you to know that I am not altogether the kind of sinner you may think me. I will not write that history, and if you refuse to come to me, I must die and leave it untold, and in that case my death-bed will be miserable."

Mildred's gentle heart could not harden itself against such an appeal as this. She told her husband only that her aunt was very ill and ardently desired to see her; and after some discussion it was arranged that she should travel quietly to Brighton, he going with her. He suggested that they should stop in Miss Fausset's house for a night or two, but Mildred told him she would much prefer to stay at an hotel; so it was decided that they should put up at the quiet hotel on the East Cliff, where Mr. Greswold had taken Pamela nearly a year before.

Mildred's health had improved under the physician's *régime;* and her husband felt hopeful as they travelled together through the summer landscape, by that line which she had travelled in her desolation

—the level landscape with glimpses of blue sea and stretches of gray beach or yellow sand, bright in the August noontide.

George Greswold had respected Mildred's reserve, and had never urged her to enlighten him as to the secret of his first wife's parentage; but he had his ideas upon the subject, and, remembering his interview with the solicitor and that gentleman's perturbation at the name of Fausset, he was inclined to think that the pious lady of Lewes Crescent might not be unconcerned in the mystery. And now this summons to Brighton seemed to confirm his suspicions.

He went no further than Miss Fausset's threshold, and allowed his wife to go to her aunt alone.

"I shall walk up and down and wait till you come out again," he said, "so I hope that you won't stay too long."

He was anxious to limit an interview which might involve agitation for Mildred. He parted from her almost reluctantly at the doorway of the gloomy house, with its entrance-hall of the pattern of forty years ago, furnished with barometer, umbrella-stand,

and tall chairs, all in Spanish mahogany, and with never a picture or a bust, bronze or porcelain, to give light and colour to the scene.

Miss Fausset had changed for the worse even in the brief interval since Mildred had last seen her. She was sitting in the back drawing-room as usual, but her table and chair had been wheeled into the bay-window, which commanded a garden with a single tree and a variety of house-tops and dead walls.

"So you have come," she said, without any form of greeting. "I hardly expected so much from you. Sit down there, if you please. I have a good deal to tell you."

"I had intended never to enter your house again, aunt. But I could not refuse to hear anything you have to say in your own justification. Only there is one act of yours which you can never justify—either to me or to God."

"What is that, pray?"

"Your refusal to tell me the secret of Fay's birth, when my happiness and my husband's depended upon my knowing it."

"To tell you that would have been to betray my own secret. Do you think, after keeping it for nine-and-thirty years, I was likely to surrender it lightly? I would sooner have cut my tongue out. I did what I could for you. I told you to ignore idle prejudice and to go back to your husband. I told you what was due from you to him, over and above all sanctimonious scruples. You would not listen to me, and whatever misery you have suffered has been misery of your own creation."

"Do not let us talk any more about it, aunt. I can never think differently about the wrong you have done me. Had I not found those letters—by the merest accident, remember—I might have gone down to my grave a desolate woman. I might have died in a foreign land, far away from the only voice that could comfort me in my last hours. No; my opinion of your guilty silence can never change. You were willing to break two hearts rather than hazard your own reputation; and yet you must have known that I would keep your secret, that I should sympathise with the sorrow of your girlhood," added Mildred, in softened tones.

Miss Fausset was slow in replying. Mildred's reproaches fell almost unheeded upon her ear. It was of herself she was thinking, with all the egotism engendered by a lonely old age, without ties of kindred or friendship, with no society but that of flatterers and parasites.

"I asked you if you had found any letters of your father's relating to that unhappy girl," she said. "I always feared his habit of keeping letters —a habit he learnt from my father. Yet I hoped that he would have burnt mine, knowing, as he did, that the one desire of my life was to obliterate that hideous past. Vain hope. I was like the ostrich. If I hid my secret in England, it was known in Italy. The man who destroyed my life was a traitor to the core of his heart, and he betrayed me to his son. He told César how he had fascinated a rich English girl, and fooled her with a mock marriage; and fifteen years ago the young man presented himself to me with the full knowledge of that dark blot upon my life—to me, here, where I had held my head so high. He let me know the full extent of his knowledge in his own subtle fashion; but he

always treated me with profound respect—he pretended to be fond of me; and, God help me, there was a charm for me in the very sound of his voice. The man who cheated me out of my life's happiness was lying in his grave: death lessens the bitterness of hatred, and I could not forget that I had once loved him."

The tears gathered slowly in the cold gray eyes, and rolled slowly down the hollow cheeks.

"Yes, I loved him, Mildred—loved him with a foolish, inexperienced girl's romantic love. I asked no questions. I believed all he told me. I flung myself blindfold into the net. His genius, his grace, his fire—ah, you can never imagine the charm of *his* manner, the variety of his talent, compared with which his son's accomplishments are paltry. You see me now a hard, elderly woman. As a girl I was warm-hearted and impetuous, full of enthusiasm and imagination, while I loved and believed in my lover. My whole nature changed after that great wrong—my heart was frozen."

There was a silence of some moments, and then Miss Fausset continued in short agitated sentences,

her fingers fidgeting nervously with the double eye-glass which she wore on a slender gold chain :

"It was his genius I worshipped. He was at the height of his success. The Milanese raved about him as a rival to Donizetti; his operas were the rage. Can you wonder that I, a girl passionately fond of music, was carried away by the excitement which was in the very air I breathed? I went to the opera night after night. I heard that fascinating music till its melodies seemed interwoven with my being. I suppose I was weak enough to let the composer see how much I admired him. He had quarrelled with his wife; and the quarrel—caused by his own misconduct—had resulted in a separation which was supposed to be permanent. There may have been people in Milan who knew that he was a married man, but my chaperon did not; and he was careful to suppress the fact from the beginning of our acquaintance.

"Yes, no doubt he found out that I was madly in love with him. He pretended to be interested in my musical studies. He advised and taught me. He played the violin divinely, and we used to play *con-*

certante duets during the long evenings, while my chaperon dozed by the fire, caring very little how I amused myself, so long as I did not interfere with her comfort. She was a sensual, selfish creature, given over to self-indulgence, and she let me have my own way in everything. He used to join me at the Cathedral at vespers. How my heart thrilled when I found him there, sitting in the shadowy chancel in the gray November light! for I knew it was for my sake he went there, not from any religious feeling. Our hands used to meet and clasp each other almost unconsciously when the music moved us as it went soaring up to the gorgeous roof, in the dim light of the hanging lamps before the altar. I have found myself kneeling with my hand in his when I came out of a dream of Paradise to which that exquisite music had lifted me. Yes, I loved him, Mildred; I loved him as well as ever you loved your husband—as passionately and unselfishly as woman ever loved. I rejoiced in the thought that I was rich, for his sake. I planned the life that we were to live together; a life in which I was to be subordinate to him in all things—his adoring slave. I

suppose most girls have some such dream. God help them, when it ends as mine did!"

Again there was a silence—a chilling muteness upon Mildred's part. How could she be sorry for this woman who had never been sorry for others; who had let her child travel from the cradle to the grave without one ray of maternal love to light her dismal journey! She remembered Fay's desolate life and blighted nature—Fay, who had a heart large enough for a great unselfish love. She remembered her aunt's impenetrable silence when a word would have restored happiness to a ruined home; she remembered, and her heart was hardened against this proud, selfish woman, whose life had been one long sacrifice to the world's opinion.

"I loved him, Mildred, and I trusted him as I would have trusted any man who had the right to call himself a gentleman," pursued Miss Fausset, eager to justify herself in the face of that implacable silence. "I had been brought up, after the fashion of those days, in a state of primeval innocence. I had never, even in fiction, been allowed to come face

to face with the cruel realities of life. I was educated in an age which thought *Jane Eyre* an improper novel, and which restricted a young woman's education to music and modern languages; the latter taught so badly, for the most part, as to be useless when she travelled. My knowledge of Italian would just enable me to translate a libretto when I had it before me in print, or to ask my way in the streets; but it was hardly enough to make me understand the answer. It never entered into my mind to doubt Paolo Castellani when he told me that, although we could not, as Papist and Protestant, be married in any church in Milan, we could be united by a civil marriage before a Milanese authority, and that such a marriage would be binding all the world over. Had I been a poor girl I might of my own instinct have suspected treachery; but I was rich and he was poor, and he would be a gainer by our marriage. Servants and governesses had impressed me with the sense of my own importance, and I knew that I was what is called a good match. So I fell into the trap, Mildred, as foolishly as a snared bird. I crept out of the house one morning after my music-lesson,

found my lover waiting for me with a carriage close by, went with him to a dingy office in a dingy street, but which had a sufficiently official air to satisfy my ignorance, and went through a certain formula, hearing something read over by an elderly man of grave appearance, and signing my name to a document after Paolo had signed his.

"It was all a sham and a cheat, Mildred. The old man was a Milanese attorney, with no more power to marry us than he had to make us immortal. The paper was a deed-of-gift by which Paolo Castellani transferred some imaginary property to me. The whole thing was a farce; but it was so cleverly planned that the cheat was effected without the aid of an accomplice. The old man acted in all good faith, and my blind confidence and ignorance of Italian accepted a common legal formality as a marriage. I went from that dark little office into the spring sunshine happy as ever bride went out of church, kissed and complimented by a throng of approving friends. I cared very little as to what my brother might think of this clandestine marriage. He would have refused his consent be-

forehand, no doubt, but he would reconcile himself to the inevitable by and by. In any event, I should be independent of his control. My fortune would be at my own disposal after my one-and-twentieth birthday—mine, to throw into my husband's lap.

"That is nearly the end of my story, Mildred. We went from Milan to Como, and after a few days at Bellagio crossed the St. Gothard, and sauntered from one lovely scene to another till we stopped at Vevay. For just six weeks I lived in a fool's paradise; but by that time my brother had traced us to Vevay—having learnt all that could be learnt about Castellani at Milan before he started in pursuit of us. He came, and my dream ended. I knew that I was a dishonoured woman, and that all my education, my innate pride in myself, and my fortune had done for me, was to place me as low as the lowest creature in the land. I left Vevay within an hour of that revelation a broken-hearted woman. I never saw my destroyer's face again. You know all, Mildred, now. Can you wonder that I shrank with abhorrence from the offspring of my disgrace—that

I refused ever to see her after I had once released myself from the hateful tie ?"

"Yes, I do wonder; I must always wonder that you were merciless to her—that you had no pity for that innocent life."

"Ah, you are your father's daughter. He wished me to hide myself in some remote village so that I might taste the sweets of maternal affection, enjoy the blessed privilege of rearing a child who at every instant of her life would remind me of the miserable infatuation that had blighted my own. No, Mildred, I was not made for such an existence as that. I have tried to do good to others; I have laboured for God's Church and God's poor. That has been my atonement."

"It would have been a better atonement to have cared for your own flesh and blood; but with your means and opportunities you might have done both. I loved Fay, remember, aunt. I cannot forget how bright and happy she might have been. I cannot forget the wrongs that warped her nature."

"You are very hard, Mildred, hard to a woman whose days are numbered."

"Are not my days numbered, aunt?" cried Mildred, with a sudden burst of passion. "Was not my heart broken when I left this house last year to go into loneliness and exile, abandoning a husband I adored? That parting was my death-blow. In all the long dreary days that have gone by since then my hold upon life has been loosening. You might have saved me that agony. You might have sent me back to my home rejoicing—and you would not. You cared more for your own pride than for my happiness. You might have made your daughter's life happy—and you would not. You cared more for the world's esteem than for her welfare. As you sacrificed her, your daughter, you have sacrificed me, your niece. I know that I am doomed. Just when God has given me back the love that makes life precious, I feel the hand of death upon me, and know that the hour of parting is near."

"I have been a sinner, Mildred; but I have suffered—I have suffered. You ought not to judge me. You have never known shame."

That last appeal softened Mildred's heart. She

went over to her aunt's chair, and leant over her and kissed her.

"Let the past be forgotten," she said, "and let us part in love."

And so, a quarter of an hour later, they parted, never to meet again on earth.

Miss Fausset died in the early winter, cut off by the first frost, like a delicate flower. She had made no change in the disposal of her property, and her death made Mildred Greswold a very rich woman.

"My aunt loved the poor," said Mildred, when she and her husband spoke of this increase of wealth. "We are both so much richer than our needs, George. We have lived in sunshine for the most part. When I am gone I should like you to do some great thing for those who live in shadow."

"My beloved, I shall remain upon this earth only to obey your will."

He lived just long enough to keep his promise. The Greswold Hospital remains, a monument of thoughtful beneficence, in one of the most wretched

neighbourhoods south of the Thames; but George Greswold and his race are ended like a tale that is told.

César Castellani, enriched by a legacy from Miss Fausset, contrives still to flourish, and still to wear a gardenia in the button-hole of an artistic coat; but fashions change quickly in the realm of light literature, and the star of the author of *Nepenthe* is sunk in the oblivion that engulfs ephemeral reputations. Castellani is still received in certain drawing-rooms; but it is in the silly circles alone that he is believed in as a man who has only missed greatness because he is too much of an artist to be a steadfast worker.

THE END.

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"The author of 'Lady Audley's Secret' still keeps her place among the most thrilling and fascinating writers of sensational fiction. Her new novel, 'Like and Unlike,' has the best qualities

of her best work. The style is as clear and nervous as ever, the plot constructed and developed with the same admirable skill, the interest as intense, and the effect on the imagination as powerful. There is at the same time more evident in this than in some former works of Miss Braddon's a higher purpose than merely to amuse and thrill the reader. The dramatic element is strong in this tale, but it is the story that speaks; the author never for a moment stops in her narrative to offer a word of comment or enforce its moral. None the less powerfully does it preach the vanity of vanities of the selfish pursuit of pleasure, the misery that is the end of heartlessness, the retribution that follows sins great and small, and also the omnipotence in noble natures of penitence and love. It would not be fair to the reader to take away from that ignorance of the future which is necessary to the keenest enjoyment of Miss Braddon's stories. 'Like and Unlike' deals with both country and town life. There are pure and noble characters in it, and others light and vain and vicious, and the currents of life of the two classes are intermingled beneficently and tragically. The title has reference to the twin brothers, who play a leading—one of them the leading—part in the drama. Their characters are admirably 'delineated and contrasted,' and the moral significance of Valentine's career is as great as its interest is absorbing. Madge is also a powerful creation. The Deverill girls and the other society characters are vividly portrayed. The story begins quietly, and for a time the reader believes that Miss Braddon is for once not going to be sensational. He finds by and by that this is a mistake, and is intensely interested by the gradual, natural and apparently inevitable way in which, out of very ordinary materials, the structure of a powerful plot rises. This will rank among the best of Miss Braddon's novels."—*Scotsman*, October 3, 1887.

⁂ *When announcing a recent Novel* ("*Phantom Fortune*"), *Messrs. Tillotson & Son published the following statement in their great coterie of newspapers:*

"In announcing the issue of another story from the pen of this gifted author, it seems scarcely necessary to write anything like an elaborate notice of her previous successes on the field of light literature. It is now many years ago since 'Lady Audley's Secret' brought Miss Braddon the fame which lasts all time; and numerous as have been the stories produced by her facile pen since then, her genius has lost none of its brilliance nor her skill its cunning. Years have not weakened her marvellous powers of imagination, nor familiarity with her productions diminished the sparkling freshness of her infinite variety. Her later works, as competent critics readily aver, exhibit higher and better qualities than her earlier, because bringing to bear long experience, a ripened understanding, and a mature judgment upon her brilliant genius, her unrivalled skill in the construction of plots, and her marvellous talent for depicting human nature under incessant changes of character and circumstances.

"A glance at the earlier chapters of the story upon which Miss Braddon is now engaged ('Phantom Fortune'), and which we shall shortly place before our readers, abundantly justifies language of the loftiest eulogy. Almost at its very opening we are introduced to characters and scenes of absorbing interest. Around distinguished personages in the political and diplomatic world gather lords and ladies of the highest rank of beauty and fashion. Indian affairs and Indian princes figure conspicuously. The Cabinet at home and the India Office are in a flutter of excitement consequent upon extraordinary rumours affecting an Anglo-Indian official of high rank, who suddenly returns to England, another Warren Hastings, to defend himself before the Imperial Parliament, but mysteriously dies on his arrival in this country, after painful interviews with his accomplished wife, a person of exalted rank and station. With a skill all Miss Braddon's own, she portrays not the outer and conventional ways of Society only, but also the inner life of the lords and ladies who constitute the leading characters, drawn by her masterly hand. As the story proceeds it may be expected to develop one of the strongest of Miss Braddon's strong plots, and to maintain her almost boundless sway in the domain of fiction."

FURTHER OPINIONS OF THE PRESS.

From amongst reviews of Miss Braddon's recent works, which would occupy a large volume if published in extenso, we select the following pithy extracts:

JUST AS I AM.

"Miss Braddon's novel, 'Just as I am,' is as fresh, as wholesome, as enthralling, as amusing as any of the stories with which, for a series of years, she has proved her title as Queen of the Circulating Library."—*The World.*

"Equals in skilful design and powerful execution any of Miss Braddon's previous works."—*Daily Telegraph.*

"The story may be added to her lengthy list of successes."—*Court Journal.*

"From the pen of the most accomplished author of the day, a lady who is perhaps the most facile and voluminous writer of fiction."—*Court Circular.*

ASPHODEL.

"The most charming novel that Miss Braddon has ever produced."—*Vanity Fair.*

"Deeply interesting and extremely well written."—*Morning Post.*

"A sound and healthy story; in one word, a true woman's book."—*Morning Advertiser.*

"The style is wonderfully easy and fluent; the conversations are brilliant, pointed, and vigorous. The early scenes are charming."—*The Athenæum.*

"Full of genuine human interest."—*The Scotsman.*

MOUNT ROYAL.

"The worthy work of a thorough artist."—*Morning Post.*

"Replete with all the freshness and charm which she has taught the public to expect from her."—*Daily Telegraph.*

"Miss Braddon's romantic spirit has been in no way quenched, but in this last novel its brighter rays are tempered by experience."—*Daily Chronicle.*

"Miss Braddon has given us a story which, while it adds to her fame as an authoress, increases our indebtedness to her; the healthy tone of 'Mount Royal' is not one of its least charms."—*Pictorial World.*

"The story can be followed with the keenest interest"—*St. James's Gazette.*

"Contains many sparkling passages and many happy thoughts."—*Sheffield Daily Telegraph.*

"The novel is without doubt a good and a bright one."—*Manchester Courier.*

TAKEN AT THE FLOOD.

"Contains more elements of success than a dozen ordinary novels."—*Bradford Observer.*

"The latest addition to Miss Braddon's unparalleled series of brilliant novels."—*Court Journal.*

"Sustains the fame which Miss Braddon has achieved as one of the first of living novelists."—*Newcastle Daily Chronicle.*

"Her work, take it for all in all, is the best we get."—*Sunday Times.*

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"Has a fresh and fascinating interest."—*Daily Telegraph.*

"Brimful of life and movement, and that life and movement of a thoroughly healthy kind."—*World.*

"In the construction of a plot Miss Braddon is unrivalled."—*Court Journal.*

DEAD MEN'S SHOES.

"Bright writing, and a story which never flags."—*Scotsman.*

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33. AN OPEN VERDICT.
34. VIXEN.

35. THE CLOVEN FOOT.
36. THE STORY OF BARBARA.
37. JUST AS I AM.
38. ASPHODEL.
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40. GOLDEN CALF.
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"I have undertaken to speak freely concerning our social life and habits, and therefore I shall not shrink from speaking about two subjects not often mentioned within the walls of a church—I mean 'sensational novels,' as they are called, and the drama. A great outcry is made against the former, which I am afraid is not very sincere, considering that those who make the outcry go on reading them. That the writers depict startling and sometimes horrible scenes no one will deny, but I am not aware that there is any more harm in that than in reading the last report of the 'Dublin Police News.' What lies at the foundation of such novels is the craving after reality as against false sentiment. Who is the worse for reading 'Hamlet,' or 'Othello,' or 'Macbeth'? There are horrors enough in these. What young man shou'd not be the better for admiring Ophelia or Desdemona? I know an aged living prelate, whose praise is widely spread in the Church for his contributions to sacred literature, and who is venerated by all who love him for his piety and saintliness, who declares that the writings of the chief of these novelists—I mean Miss Braddon—are among the best of the works of fiction. Judge for yourselves. I hold that her books are *the very contrast* of the few French sensation novels that I have read, whose philosophy might be summed up in the scoffer's words, 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.'"

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